Whispers in the High Forest

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Home sweet home

Rugnar trudged down the muddy path, the familiar outlines of his village Hollowbarn slowly emerging through the morning mist. His boots were heavy with caked dirt, but he hardly noticed; the weight of seven long years in the northern wars pressed harder on his back than any mud ever could. The old cottages, many now collapsed or abandoned, stood silent like tombstones. Once, a hundred and fifty souls had called this place home. Now, a mere fifteen remained. Farmers mostly, and old Gerf the blacksmith, still stubbornly hammering away in his forge.

Rugnar’s cottage sat at the edge of the village, tucked near a line of stunted fruit trees he had planted as a young man. His heart beat strangely as he pushed open the warped wooden door. Dust motes danced in the dim light, and spider webs clung to every corner. He set down his pack with a heavy thud, the sound startling in the hollow space. His living room was much as he remembered, only buried under years of neglect.

He pulled off his battered leather armor, tossing it onto the chair before dragging out an old chest from under the stairwell. With a grunt, he opened it and placed his short sword carefully inside, followed by his boots and dented helmet. Sitting back on the creaking chair, Rugnar stared into the hearth, where only the ghost of a fire remained.

"Aye," he muttered, running a thick hand through his dusty beard. "Field needs plowin', trees need tendin', and the gods know these tools are as broken as me bones."

The evening passed quietly. Rugnar found a cracked mug and drank water drawn from the village well, ignoring the taste of wood rot on the rim. Sleep came heavily, pulling him into a dreamless void until the light of dawn crept through the broken shutters.

The next morning, Rugnar rose with the sun, joints protesting each movement. He gathered an armful of rusted tools—an axe with a cracked handle, a plow blade duller than a river rock, a hoe bent near to breaking—and made his way to the blacksmith's forge. Gerf, a wiry man with a long white beard and arms still thick as tree trunks, looked up from his anvil as Rugnar approached.

"Well, look what the cats dragged back," Gerf said, grinning through broken teeth.

Rugnar grunted a greeting, setting the tools down with a clatter. "Got some fixin' needs doin'."

Gerf wiped his hands on a grimy rag and inspected the tools one by one. "Hmph. Might as well forge ye new ones," he muttered, shaking his head. "But I'll see what I can manage."

"I'll be needin' 'em by week's end," Rugnar said. "The field won't plow itself."

Gerf chuckled, the sound like gravel rolling downhill. "Good to see a man workin' the land again. Been too long."

Leaving the tools with Gerf, Rugnar made his way to the communal barn. The village horse, a thick, shaggy beast named Barl, blinked sleepily at him from his stall. Rugnar saddled the beast with the old plow, whispering reassurances into the horse’s twitching ear.

"Come now, Barl. Time to earn yer oats."

The morning was spent behind the plow, muscles burning with each stubborn furrow. Rugnar drove the blade through the hardened soil, feeling a strange peace settle over him. No screams of dying men, no clash of iron or fire raining from the skies—only the clean smell of earth and the steady rhythm of work.

When the sun reached its zenith, Rugnar wiped the sweat from his brow and led Barl back to the barn. Hungry and tired, he returned to his cottage. The thought of brewing ale came to him as he descended into the cellar, seeking cool air and perhaps some forgotten stores. The place was empty but for a few oak barrels, dry and cracked from years of disuse.

"Aye," Rugnar said aloud, tapping one with a calloused knuckle. "Soon enough. Some good strong ale to fill these bones."

He sat on the cellar steps for a moment, listening to the hollow quiet of the house above. It was a beginning, he thought. Hard work, solitude, a chance to rebuild. Rugnar smiled to himself, the first real smile in longer than he could remember.

Tomorrow, perhaps, he would start mending the orchard. The trees would need care if they were to bear fruit come autumn. But tonight, he would rest, and dream, not of war and death, but of harvests to come.

The next morning, Rugnar rose with the first crow of the rooster. His muscles still ached from the day's plowing, but he felt a purpose in his bones he had not known for years. After breaking his fast with a crust of bread and a gulp of well water, he headed toward Gerf's forge. The blacksmith was already hard at work, hammering a red-hot horseshoe on his anvil. Seeing Rugnar approach, Gerf nodded and kicked a small crate toward him with a booted foot.

"Tools're fixed. Better than new, if I say so meself," Gerf said, wiping his brow with a soot-stained cloth.

Rugnar knelt to inspect them. The axe gleamed sharp, the plow blade shone with a new edge, and the hoe stood straight and proud again. Rugnar grunted in satisfaction, slipping Gerf 6 gp of coin. Gerf protested half-heartedly, but Rugnar shoved it into the old man's hand.

"Earned it fair," Rugnar said simply. Slinging the tools over his back, he made his way back to his cottage.

The roof was his first concern. Several shingles had blown away over the years, and some sections had collapsed altogether. Rugnar fetched clay from the nearby river, packing it carefully into a large basket, and hauled it back to his house. From the village storage house —a place now barely visited, with its supplies gathering dust—he selected a few stout planks and some wooden beams.

Working from dawn until dusk, Rugnar repaired the sagging roof, replacing rotted planks and sealing gaps with the river clay. He braced the sagging walls, ripped out broken stairboards leading down to the cellar, and carefully laid new ones in their place. The chimney had crumbled to half its proper height, so he gathered scattered stones from the river bank, some clay and spent a whole afternoon resetting it, stone by stone, mortar made from clay and patience.

When his arms began to ache beyond reason, Rugnar would sit back on his repaired chair, light his short-stemmed pipe, and puff quietly, watching the smoke curl up toward the repaired chimney.

The next day and for six days after, Rugnar returned to the fields. The plow bit deeper now with its new edge, and Barl the horse worked steadily without complaint. Row by row, the hard earth turned over, dark and rich and promising. In the quiet stretches between work, Rugnar would lean on the plow handles, pipe in hand, and think on what had been and what might yet be. The sun rose and fell, Rugnar planted barley and wheat with careful hands, spacing the seeds with the wisdom of a farmer born.

In the evenings, when his body was too tired for heavy work, he took to the smaller tasks of mending his home. His chair, once so rickety it would barely hold his armored frame, he smoothed with a hand planer, carving away years of roughness until the wood gleamed with a fresh face. His table, gouged and scarred by the years, he planed as well, rubbing it with a cloth soaked in oil until it shone faintly in the firelight.

Every day after the fields were tended and the house mended, Rugnar walked to the river, fishing line in hand. Sometimes he caught trout, other days only minnows, but whatever the river offered he took with grateful hands. He cooked his catches in an old iron cauldron set

over the hearth fire, seasoning the meat with wild herbs he gathered from the edges of the fields. The smell of fish stew filled the house, chased away the musty odor of abandonment, and made the place feel like home again.

At night, Rugnar would sit by the hearth, pipe smoke curling around him, belly full and muscles weary but content. The flames danced in the hearth, and the shadows on the walls no longer seemed so heavy.

The village was still quiet, almost too quiet, but in the heart of Rugnar's small world, life had begun to beat again, slow and steady like the turning of the seasons.

Weeks drifted by, soft and sure as the flow of the river. Rugnar found himself slipping into the rhythms of the land as if he had never left. The barley and wheat fields were well on their way, but there was still more to be done. One crisp morning, he paid a visit to Mara, a sturdy woman with a face like a kindly oak tree and hands always busy with something or other. Her cottage stood near the village square, surrounded by a riot of green where her garden had already begun to sprout.

"Need some seeds, Mara," Rugnar said, tipping his cap politely.

Mara wiped her hands on her apron and smiled. "Aye, figured you might come round sooner or later. What're you wantin'?"

"Some for the table. Carrots, turnips, maybe some beans. Cabbage too, if you got any left."

She nodded and disappeared inside her house, returning a moment later with a small burlap sack. She handed it over with a chuckle.

"Take what you need. Plant well, Rugnar, and when harvest comes, you can pay me back in kind."

"I'll see to it," Rugnar said, pressing a few copper coins into her palm all the same. "For your trouble."

Mara accepted with a wink. "A little extra never hurt."

Back home, Rugnar planted the seeds in careful rows beside his fields, using a wooden dibble stick he carved himself. He tended his apple and pear trees too, pruning dead branches and clearing away tangled undergrowth from their roots. The fruit was still months away, but already the promise of sweet harvest hung in the air.

On cooler evenings, Rugnar took his old hunting bow from above the hearth and slipped into the nearby forest. He moved silently through the underbrush, a shadow among shadows. Some nights he brought down a plump deer, other times a wild boar. Whatever he caught, he shared freely with the villagers. Word would quickly spread, and before long, folks gathered near his hearth with baskets and clay pots, eager for fresh meat. In exchange, they left what they could—jars of pickled vegetables, freshly baked bread, bundles of wool, or, when they had little else, a handful of coins.

Life in the village had always been one of sharing. Tools passed from hand to hand without thought, the village horse was everyone's beast, and larger labors like cutting wood or raising a new roof saw all able-bodied folk lending their strength. No man stood alone here unless he chose to.

One bright morning, Rugnar stood in his yard, arms crossed, surveying the empty space beside his cottage. "A man needs beasts if he wants to live well," he muttered to himself. Without wasting time, he set to building pens, driving posts deep into the soil and stretching stout fencing between them. He thatched a small roofed shelter to keep the worst of the weather off the animals. When all was ready, he hitched a battered wagon to the village mule —an ornery creature named Millie—and set off toward the neighboring village of Shallow.

The road to Shallow wound through fields and patches of forest, a journey of several hours. When Rugnar arrived, he found the marketplace busy, full of noise and the smells of fresh bread, leather, and livestock. He approached a wrinkled farmer standing near a pen of pigs.

"Looking to buy," Rugnar said, jerking his thumb toward the pigs.

The farmer squinted at him, then grinned. "Fine beasts, these. Good for breeding. Two for three silver?"

Rugnar inspected the pigs, sturdy and alert, then nodded. "Done." He counted out the coins carefully into the farmer’s palm.

He moved on to a pen of sheep, where a younger lad haggled fiercely over the price.

"Need one good sheep, for wool and meat," Rugnar said when the lad turned to him.

"One gold," the boy said boldly.

Rugnar barked a laugh. "For that scrawny thing? Half a gold and a copper besides."

After some haggling and much spitting into palms, they agreed on three-quarters of a gold. Rugnar loaded the sheep into the wagon, and finally bought a few squawking chickens from an old woman with a sharp tongue who threw in a free rooster "to keep the hens honest."

By dusk, Rugnar rattled back into his village, the wagon creaking under its precious load. He guided the animals into their new pens, tossing them feed from sacks he had wisely bought in Shallow. The pigs snorted happily, the sheep bleated and huddled in a corner, and the chickens pecked about noisily in the dirt.

Standing there with the sun setting behind him, Rugnar puffed on his pipe and watched the animals settle in. The smoke curled around his beard, and he smiled a slow, contented smile.

"Home," he said aloud to the evening sky. "A real home, again."

Tomorrow, he thought, he would mend the village well. It leaned dangerously these days, and the village folk would need it strong for the summer to come.

But for tonight, he would sit by his hearth, stew a bit of pork with wild onions, and listen to the quiet breathing of a world slowly healing.

The days grew longer and warmer, and with spring ripening into summer, the work of the village gathered speed. One morning, Rugnar joined the other men as they marched into the forest, axes slung over their shoulders, heavy saws resting in calloused hands. The sun filtered through the tall pines, dappling the ground in gold and shadow. They chose the stoutest trees, felling them with steady swings, the rhythmic sound of blades biting into wood filling the forest air.

"Good cut, Rugnar!" called Bren, one of the younger farmers, as Rugnar drove his axe deep into the heart of an old oak.

"Got to leave a clean stump," Rugnar grunted, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Less rot, easier to work."

Once the trees fell with a heavy crash, the men cleared them of branches, stacking them into neat piles. Then with hand saws, they sliced the trunks into thick planks, setting aside the straighter ones for building and furniture making.

When the day's work ended, they rolled the logs onto sledges and dragged them back to the village with the help of Millie the mule and the communal horse. Rugnar stacked his share neatly by his cottage, already thinking of new projects—a smokehouse perhaps, or a better shed for his tools.

In the evenings, Rugnar visited Mara again, this time to speak of barley and sheep.

"Got a mind to brew some ale," he said as he leaned on her fence, watching her chickens scratch in the dirt.

Mara laughed. "About time you did. I’ve got a few sacks o' barley I can spare. Good grain, strong. Grown it meself."

They agreed on a price, goods and a little coin, and Rugnar carted the heavy sacks back to his cottage. Before he left, Mara added, "And as for yer sheep, bring him by tomorrow. My ewes are just ready. Good to keep the bloodlines strong."

"Gladly," Rugnar said, clapping her on the shoulder with a friendly chuckle. "My thanks, Mara."

Back at home, Rugnar set about preparing for the ale. He built a small brew kettle from an old copper pot, fitted a wooden spigot onto one of the barrels in his cellar, and cleaned it thoroughly with boiled water and ash. He soaked the barley for two days, then spread it out on linen to germinate, turning it thrice daily.

"A man's drink, made by a man's hands," he muttered as he worked, smiling to himself.

After drying and roasting the sprouted barley over a low fire, Rugnar ground it into coarse malt. He boiled it in water with a handful of wild hops he gathered from the forest's edge,

their sharp smell stinging his nose. When the wort cooled, he poured it carefully into the barrel and sealed it tight, leaving it in the cool darkness of his cellar to ferment.

Weeks slipped past like lazy clouds. Rugnar kept busy. He mated his sheep with Mara's flock, both of them shaking hands over the deal with wide grins. His evenings were spent working hides—curing the pelts of deer and boar he had hunted. He scraped them clean with a sharp knife, stretched them on wooden frames, and soaked them in mixtures of water and ash until they were supple.

One evening, Rugnar decided it was time to put up a trophy. He brought out the head of a fierce boar he had taken in the forest weeks before. Its tusks curved like cruel hooks, its small eyes glinting even in death. Rugnar cleaned the skull thoroughly, drying it over the hearth before mounting it on a thick oak plaque he had planed himself.

As he fixed it onto the main wall of his cottage, Rugnar stepped back, pipe in hand, admiring his handiwork.

"Not the hall of kings," he said, exhaling smoke, "but it'll do."

Down in the cellar, the ale was bubbling gently, the scent of yeast and barley thick in the cool air. Rugnar checked the barrel often, tapping a little out each time to taste the progress.

"Needs a bit more time," he muttered after one sip, smacking his lips. "Patience, Rugnar. Good things come slow."

Outside, the village bustled with life. Children played between cottages, women gathered at the well to gossip and share news, and the men spoke of a great hunting trip they planned to the deeper woods where game was said to be plentiful. Rugnar sat in his chair, his worn hands resting on the arms he had smoothed and polished, feeling—for the first time in years—not the hunger for war, but the quiet satisfaction of life rooted deep in the earth.

A few more weeks slipped by, and the heavy, sweet smell from the cellar told Rugnar all he needed to know. The ale was ready. He tapped a small wooden keg and poured a mug full, the dark liquid sloshing thick and rich. Taking a long draught, he smacked his lips in approval.

"Aye," he said to himself, smiling wide, "strong as a mountain goat and twice as mean."

Wasting no time, Rugnar walked through the village, inviting folks to come that evening. Mara agreed straightaway, chuckling as she patted his arm.

"I'll bring some cheese and bread. We'll see if yer brew is worth all the braggin', Rugnar."

Gerf the blacksmith, leaning on his hammer at the forge, nodded and said, "About time we had a good drink. I'll bring the old flute if me fingers remember how to dance over the holes."

As the sun dipped low and the sky turned to honey, the villagers gathered at Rugnar's cottage. Mugs and clay cups clattered together as Rugnar filled them one by one from the keg

set proudly on his table. Laughter filled the air, the first loud and careless laughter the village had known in a long while.

Mara raised her mug high. "To Rugnar, and to a harvest worth drinkin' to!"

The people cheered, and soon the strong ale did its work, loosening tongues and brightening eyes. Someone inevitably asked Rugnar about the war, their voice slurred and cautious.

"So, Rugnar," Gerf said, leaning forward with an elbow on the table, "you've seen it all, eh? Battles and all that blood and glory?"

Rugnar shifted uncomfortably, taking a long pull of ale before answering. "Not like the songs tell it," he said quietly. "Most days were just standin’ around in the barracks, polishin' armor, guardin’ some dusty gate, or marchin' up and down the same road ‘til the boots wore thin."

"But there were battles, weren't there?" a young lad pressed, his eyes wide.

"Aye," Rugnar said, voice thick. "A few. One near the Cold River, where the snow was so deep it swallowed men whole. Another at the ruined fort of Grimshaw, where we broke their lines in the dark with nothin' but axes and the gods' mercy. But fightin'... it ain't clean, and it sure ain't glorious. It's messy, and it's loud, and it stinks of fear."

The room fell a little quieter, the weight of his words settling over them. Rugnar lifted his mug again, shaking the heaviness from his shoulders.

"But enough of that. Tonight’s for livin', not rememberin'."

With that, Gerf pulled out his battered old flute and began to play a lively tune. The mood lifted again like a breeze catching fallen leaves. Some of the villagers clapped and stomped their feet, while a few couples spun each other clumsily around Rugnar’s living room, laughing and singing.

The ale flowed until the stars glimmered bright and wild in the black velvet sky. Rugnar, feeling lightheaded and content, slipped away from the noisy cottage and walked down to the river. He stripped off his sweat-soaked clothes and waded into the cool water, sighing as it closed over his tired muscles.

He floated on his back, staring at the sky, watching the last embers of the sunset burn out behind the trees. The river whispered against the banks, and for the first time in many years, Rugnar felt no weight dragging him down.

The next morning brought a clear sky and a slight headache. Rugnar brewed himself a strong tea of mint and willow bark to steady his mind. Feeling the need for another small comfort, he set to work building a bench for the front of his house.

He chose two stout planks from his woodpile, measuring and cutting carefully, driving nails with slow, sure strokes. By midday, a sturdy bench stood just outside his door, catching the warm morning sun. Rugnar sat on it, mug of water in hand, and admired the simple thing.

"Good sittin' spot," he said to himself.

Without losing the day, he began working on a new project: a closet for his tools and clothing. He sketched out a rough plan in the dirt with a stick, muttering calculations under his breath.

"Need it deep enough for the axe and the bow... hooks for the cloak, shelves for the boots..."

He spent the afternoon sawing planks to length, hammering the frame together, and fitting the back panels carefully so no damp from the walls would rot them out. As he worked, the familiar rhythms of labor, the smell of fresh-cut wood, and the creak of tools soothed him. It was honest work, and it made the world make sense.

The village bustled around him, but Rugnar's mind was clear, his hands steady, and his heart —though still bearing old scars—felt lighter than it had in years.

Rugnar sat on his newly built bench one morning, puffing on his pipe and thumbing a worn coin pouch. It felt alarmingly light. He tipped it over, letting the coins spill into his palm. Twenty gold pieces remained, from the eighty he had returned with after the war.

He frowned thoughtfully, tapping the side of his pipe.

"Can't live on air and dreams," he muttered. "Time to turn work into coin."

Ironhelm

Without wasting time, Rugnar packed his wagon. He bundled up eight hides—deer and boar both, clean and well-cured. He hefted a full barrel of his dark, strong ale onto the wagon bed, alongside two sturdy crates packed with carrots, beans, and cabbage from his garden. With Millie the mule hitched up, Rugnar set off down the winding dirt road leading to Ironhelm, a city of about 13 000 people.

The journey took the better part of half a day, but as the sun hung high overhead, the city's towers and stout walls rose into view. Ironhelm, a place of ancient stones and deeper histories. Its heart was dwarven, built with massive blocks of granite fitted so tightly together that no blade of grass could grow between them. High, arched gates stood flanked by statues of hammer-wielding kings. Streets of dark cobblestone wound in tight, maze-like paths through neighborhoods layered upon layers, like stone built atop stone through the slow churn of centuries.

The people of Ironhelm were as varied as the stones themselves. Rugnar saw tall elves with flowing robes discussing quietly with merchants, sturdy dwarves bustling about in finely forged armor, half-orcs with great packs of wares slung across their backs, and nimble halflings weaving through the crowds with baskets bigger than themselves.

The market district sprawled just inside the eastern gate, a chaotic symphony of sights, smells, and sounds. Merchants shouted their wares from colorful stands draped in cloth banners. The scent of roasting meat mingled with the tang of tanned leather and exotic spices. Bells tinkled from passing wagons, dogs barked, children laughed, and somewhere a bard played a lively tune on a fiddle.

Rugnar found a spot along the edge of the main square, a place near a fountain where dwarves traditionally gathered. He paid a silver piece to a grizzled old man in charge of the stands—a human missing two fingers but quick with a broad smile.

"One silver for whole day," the man said, counting the coin carefully before nodding Rugnar toward an empty booth.

Rugnar set up his wares, spreading the hides neatly over the front rail, propping the vegetable crates visibly at the side, and placing the barrel of ale proudly in the center with a row of mugs he had thought to bring.

The hours passed steadily. People wandered by, some simply looking, others stopping to haggle. A stout dwarf with a braided beard inspected the hides closely.

"Fine work," the dwarf said, rubbing a boar hide between thick fingers. "Good tanning. What’s yer price?"

"Three gold a hide," Rugnar said without blinking.

The dwarf haggled him down to one, but Rugnar still smiled as he tucked the coins away. By midday, six of his hides had sold, and a pair of elven hunters bought another crate of vegetables, complimenting the sweetness of his carrots.

The barrel of ale, however, was the true draw. Word spread quickly among the market-goers of a dark ale strong enough to fell a mule and smooth enough to put a song in a man’s heart. Rugnar sold mug after mug for a silver each, and before long the barrel was drained dry.

An old halfling, drunk as a bishop, staggered away from Rugnar's stand shouting, "Best ale south o' the Spine mountains!"

Rugnar chuckled, counting his takings carefully at the end of the day. Eleven gold coins jingled warmly in his pouch. It was not a king’s ransom, but it was good, honest earnings.

As the sun dipped low and cast long shadows across the towering stone buildings of Ironhelm, Rugnar loaded his empty crates and remaining goods back onto the wagon. Millie plodded steadily along the road home, the day's weight lifted from Rugnar’s shoulders.

He smoked his pipe as he rode, watching the sky burn orange and purple. The air smelled of dust, woodsmoke, and the promise of a good night's rest. His mind drifted already to new ideas—more ale to brew, more hides to cure, perhaps even finer goods to sell. Life, it seemed, had not finished offering him chances yet.

Rugnar rolled into Hollowbarn just as the last light of the sun touched the treetops. The wheels of his wagon creaked and groaned as he pulled up to his cottage. He unloaded the remaining crates of vegetables, carefully stacking them in the cool of his cellar for the next market days. His mind buzzed with ideas as he worked, the sweet scent of earth and ale filling the cool, dark space.

He sat on his bench afterward, pipe in hand, legs stretched out, watching the stars blink into existence.

"Not just Ironhelm," he muttered to himself. "Nearby villages too. Stonebrook, Windmere... folk there’d pay good coin for ale, fresh greens, hides. Even more if I bring pottery and tools with me."

Already he saw it clear: Mara's hands crafting fine, strong pottery—simple, but beautiful in its honesty. Gerf’s tools, built to last longer than the man using them. And Rugnar’s own goods—dark ale rich enough to make a dwarf weep, hearty vegetables from the fields, and thick, supple hides.

A few days later, the men of the village gathered at the green under the old ash tree, the place where village matters were spoken and settled. Rugnar leaned on his axe, listening as old Arvel, the unofficial elder now, laid out the idea.

"We've got wide fields and good hands," Arvel said, voice raspy but strong. "But sellin' grain alone won't fatten our purses. Flour's where the coin lies. And for that, we need a mill."

"Aye," Rugnar said, nodding. "Grain’s heavy, fills a cart fast. Flour’s worth twice for the weight. Easier to carry to town."

So it was agreed. Every able-bodied man in Hollowbarn would lend hands and tools to the work. They chose a bend in the river just downstream, where the water ran swift and clear.

They spent days gathering flat stones from the riverbank, stacking them into a thick, steady foundation for the mill. Rugnar and Gerf worked side by side, the old blacksmith setting the stones with care, Rugnar hoisting the heavier blocks into place.

"Strong back, strong stones," Gerf grunted as they wedged a slab into place.

"We'll need 'em both," Rugnar replied, wiping sweat from his brow.

When the stone base was finished, they raised the skeleton of the mill—thick timber beams hauled from the forest, hewn square by their axes, and hammered together with pegs and iron nails Gerf fashioned at his forge. The building grew in steady layers, a roof coming last, thatched with reeds cut from the river marsh.

The waterwheel was the greatest task. They carved it from stout oak, fitting the paddles tightly together. Rugnar climbed into the river more than once, boots sinking into the mud, to guide the wheel's axle into place. When they finally set it spinning with the river's current, a cheer rose from the gathered villagers.

"A fine thing," Mara said, hands on her hips, a proud smile on her face.

"Better than fine," Rugnar said, watching the great wheel turn. "It'll feed our pockets as well as our bellies."

With the watermill finished, they could grind barley and wheat into fine flour, fit for city bakers and merchant houses. The price of flour in Ironhelm was good, better by far than what they earned hauling sacks of raw grain. Hollowbarn's wide fields, now green and rippling with young shoots, promised a harvest to fill wagons.

That night, the village gathered again, sharing bread and ale, speaking of better times to come. Rugnar leaned back on his bench, feeling the simple, deep satisfaction of a plan set in motion.

"Hard work ahead," Arvel said, raising his mug.

"Aye," Rugnar agreed, clinking his own against it. "But good work. The kind that builds a future."

As the stars wheeled overhead and the river sang to the turning of the waterwheel, Hollowbarn stood ready to rise again, one stone, one harvest, one honest day's labor at a time.

The summer wore itself thin, and when the mornings came crisp and the fields stood heavy with golden heads of grain, it was harvest time. Rugnar rose before dawn, as did every man and woman in Hollowbarn. The fields swayed like a sea of gold under the rising sun. Sickles gleamed in rough hands, and the air buzzed with the sound of cutting, gathering, and the low murmur of songs hummed to the rhythm of the scythe.

Rugnar worked with the others, cutting barley and wheat by hand, bundling the stalks into fat sheaves, and stacking them neatly in rows to dry under the sun. Barl the horse pulled heavy sledges back and forth from the fields to the village storerooms, where the grain was laid out to finish drying. Day after day they worked, sweat soaking through tunics, blisters forming and breaking, laughter and grumbled curses shared alike.

When all was gathered, the storerooms bulged with promise. The barley and wheat dried in the lofts, turned daily with long wooden rakes to keep the air moving through them. A few

weeks passed under the steady watch of a late summer sun, and then the time came for the mill.

Rugnar stood with a few of the village men as they fed the first sacks of dry grain into the hopper of the watermill. The great wheel turned, creaking and groaning as it spun the

millstones inside. Fine white flour sifted down into wooden bins, a soft cloud rising in the air. The men cheered and clapped each other on the back, and Rugnar grinned broadly.

"A good season," he said, tasting a pinch of the fresh flour on his tongue. "Good enough to make us rich men, if we're careful."

After ensuring that the milling was proceeding well, Rugnar took a break from village life. He packed a small satchel and headed into the hills and meadows that stretched beyond Hollowbarn. For days he wandered the green wilds, breathing in the sweet scent of pine and wildflowers. Along a sunny slope, he found what he sought: pipeweed, growing thick and strong among the rocks.

"Blessed be the green hills," he muttered, kneeling down to gather armfuls of the leafy plants.

With his pack stuffed full, Rugnar returned home, set aside a patch of his own field, and carefully planted rows of pipeweed, smiling to himself as he thought of the sweet smoke curling from his pipe in the cold months to come.

Not long after, Rugnar hitched Millie to the wagon and made a wide circuit of the nearby villages. In Stonebrook, he found a beekeeper willing to part with jars of thick, golden honey for just a handful of silver. In Windmere, he bought bolts of linen cloth from a weaver whose business had been slow. He stored the honey and cloth in his cellar, stacking them alongside his ale barrels and dried goods, already planning their sale for the winter markets.

Feeling the pull of the forest again, Rugnar took his bow and set out for the High Forest, a deep and ancient place where the trees grew tall enough to scrape the clouds. The air was cooler there, filled with the musk of moss and damp earth.

It was near a clearing, just past midday, when he heard the low growl.

Rugnar turned and found himself facing four wolves, lean and hungry-eyed. They circled him, muscles rippling under their dusty coats.

"Come then," Rugnar said, drawing his short sword with a steady hand, his heart pounding. "I'll not run from the likes of you."

The first wolf lunged, and Rugnar sidestepped, slashing at its flank. It yelped and stumbled away. The second and third wolves rushed together. Rugnar braced, thrusting his blade forward to catch the nearest one in the chest. Blood sprayed warm across his hand as the beast fell.

The last wolf hung back, baring its fangs, wary now. Rugnar pivoted, lifting his blade high and shouting, a deep roar from his gut. The injured wolf tried another desperate lunge, but Rugnar struck it down with a heavy boot and a quick slice.

The final wolf turned and fled into the trees.

Breathing hard, Rugnar wiped his blade clean on the grass and set to work skinning the fallen beasts. He worked methodically, muttering under his breath.

"Fine pelts these'll make. Fine enough to fetch good coin or a good cloak against the winter."

He skinned them cleanly, taking the best parts of the hides and setting the carcasses aside for the forest to claim. Later, back in his cottage, he stretched the pelts on frames, scraping and salting them carefully to cure them for trade or use.

The sun dipped low behind the High Forest as Rugnar sat by his hearth, a mug of ale in one hand, the scent of fresh wolf pelts hanging in the air.

"A good day's work," he said aloud to the empty room, feeling the slow, steady satisfaction of a man who had earned his peace through sweat, steel, and stubbornness.

The morning sun barely touched the rooftops of Hollowbarn when Rugnar heaved the last sack of barley flour onto the wagon. He stood back, surveying his goods with a satisfied grunt. Three jars of thick, golden honey tied carefully with waxed cloth. Two rolls of fine linen from Windmere, bright and strong. A half-dozen gleaming new tools, forged by Gerf himself—hammers, chisels, and knives. A dozen pieces of Mara's pottery, simple but lovely with their swirling patterns. Several small sacks of barley flour, ground fresh in Hollowbarn’s new mill. Two full barrels of his dark ale, and finally, a bundle of soft, heavy pelts from the wolves and deer he had hunted.

"Good load," Rugnar muttered, climbing onto the wagon seat. "Good day for coin."

He gave Millie a sharp flick of the reins, and the old mule grunted and started plodding down the dusty road toward Ironhelm. The half-day journey passed in the usual steady rattle of wheels and the hum of summer insects. By noon, the great stone gates of Ironhelm loomed ahead, the statues of hammer-wielding kings casting long shadows over the bustling road.

Inside, the city was alive. Merchants hawked wares from all corners of the land, and the thick air smelled of roasting meat, wet stone, and spice. Rugnar paid one silver piece to the stout human in charge of market stands—a gruff fellow who barely glanced at him before waving him toward a spot near the fountain.

He set out his goods carefully, stacking the barley flour sacks in a neat pile, arranging pottery in a line so each painted swirl caught the eye, unrolling a bolt of linen across the back rail, and placing mugs ready for pouring ale. The tools gleamed in the sun, the pelts draped heavy and tempting over a wooden bar.

It wasn’t long before the crowd came to him. A halfling woman with quick fingers and sharp eyes approached first, admiring the pottery.

"Two gold, eh? I'll take three bowls, no less," she said, wagging a finger at him.

"Three bowls, six gold," Rugnar said, crossing his arms.

"Four and a mug of that ale!" she countered, laughing.

Rugnar chuckled. "Done. But you drink the ale here, mind you. No spillin' it over the wares."

The halfling nodded eagerly, passing over eight gold and some silver coins and cradling her bowls with care before sitting herself down to enjoy a mug of ale.

Next came a tall half-orc with a broad leather apron, his tusks showing as he grinned at Rugnar’s tools.

"Fine work. Who forged these?" he asked, hefting a hammer like it weighed nothing.

"Gerf of Hollowbarn," Rugnar said proudly. "Best smith in three valleys."

"I'll take two hammers and a chisel," the half-orc said, dropping thirty gold pieces into Rugnar's hand without a second thought.

An elven trader in fine robes stopped to finger the linen cloth.

"Exceptional weave," he said, voice soft and precise. "Fifty gold for the roll?"

"That's the price," Rugnar answered simply.

The elf nodded and made the purchase without haggling, tucking the cloth into his satchel as if it were treasure.

Throughout the afternoon, Rugnar sold steadily. Dwarven craftsmen bought his barley flour, praising the rich, nutty smell of it. Human laborers, sweaty and dust-streaked from the quarries, crowded around his barrel of ale, trading silver coins for frothy mugs. A merchant woman from a far-off town purchased two wolf pelts, feeling the thick fur between her fingers before nodding in approval.

"Hardy stuff," she said. "Winter's coming fast. Folk'll pay well for cloaks like these."

The sun dipped lower, and Rugnar’s wagon emptied. By day’s end, his purse jingled heavy at his side, and only a few odds and ends remained.

Rugnar leaned back against his wagon, puffing contentedly on his pipe as the last shoppers drifted away. The sky above Ironhelm turned to a soft shade of purple, the towers casting long, jagged shadows across the stone streets.

"A good day's trade," Rugnar said quietly, his voice lost in the rumble of the city settling into evening.

Tomorrow he would head home with full pockets and an empty wagon, but tonight he would find a warm place to sleep and perhaps another mug or two of his own fine ale.

The road darkened as Rugnar turned his wagon into the caravan district, a place where the city's worn travelers and dusty merchants found shelter. The streets here were rutted and uneven, choked with mud and ash. Somewhere nearby, a trash heap smoldered, sending up thick, noxious smoke that stung Rugnar’s nose and made Millie the mule snort in protest. He pulled up outside a modest half-timbered inn, its small hedged yard doing little to keep out the grimy air.

A weather-worn sign swung overhead The Harper and Mace, creaking on rusted chains, and over the door hung a fake dragon's skull—yellowed and cracked, a poor carving but fierce enough in the dim light. Rugnar grunted, tying Millie’s reins to a hitching post and tossing her a few carrots from his sack.

"Rest easy, old girl. We'll be off come sunrise."

Inside, the inn was dim and smelled faintly of smoke and sour beer. The hearth crackled low, the fake dragon's skull grinning down at the room. Beds there were none, only woolen blankets laid out near the fire for weary travelers to curl up with. Rugnar found the sight familiar enough to accept.

Behind the rough counter stood the innkeeper, a heavyset human woman with bright, watchful eyes. Waru, someone had said her name was. She wore a simple skirt stained from years of ale spills and grease, but her fingers sported a curious silver ring that glimmered in the firelight.

"Room’s by the hearth," she said, barely glancing up. "Blanket's yours for two silver. Supper costs more."

Rugnar tossed her two silver coins. "What's on the board, then?"

Waru rattled off the menu in a bored tone. "Pickled hare and whey cheese, eight silver. Roasted artichoke with a mug o' beer, four silver. Buckwheat porridge with ale, same."

Rugnar thought a moment, then said, "Artichoke and beer, then."

Waru nodded and shuffled off toward the small kitchen.

The common room held a handful of folk: a copper-haired elf sitting quietly by himself under a black cloak, sipping from a battered tin mug; a tall, narrow-framed dwarf with soft grey eyes dressed in fine clothes and silk gloves, his gaze restless, scanning the room; and two rough-looking dwarves sitting together, whispering over a jug of cheap wine—one with black hair and sharp hazel eyes, the other a grizzled fellow with braided white hair.

Rugnar found a corner by the hearth and sat down, resting his aching back against the wall. He caught bits of conversation drifting through the smoky air.

"...heard a caravan's coming this week," someone murmured at a nearby table. "Elixirs... wardin' off the bloodcurse and the wolf-plague. Could fetch a fair price."

Eoved, the elf, shot Rugnar a glance but said nothing. He seemed more interested in watching the room, his hand resting lightly on a dagger at his belt. Dwari, the tall dwarf, shifted uncomfortably, whispering to himself and fingering a silver locket at his chest. Rugnar caught a few words—"daughter," "missing," "last seen near Ironhelm"—before the man caught him staring and looked away quickly.

Waru returned with a wooden plate heaped with roasted artichokes, a crust of bread, and a dented mug sloshing over with warm beer. Rugnar accepted it with a grunt of thanks and set to eating, chewing thoughtfully as he listened to the low hum of the room.

Meda and Gudli, the rougher dwarves, kept to themselves, but there was an edge to their talk Rugnar didn’t much like—the kind of talk that wrapped around dark deeds and darker intentions.

When he finished his meal, Rugnar unrolled a blanket by the fire, leaned back, and lit his pipe. The warmth of the hearth, the heavy food in his belly, and the low murmur of tired travelers soon had him dozing.

In the shadows behind the counter, Waru polished a mug and touched her silver ring lightly, her eyes flicking over Rugnar and the others with quiet calculation.

Tomorrow would bring another day's travel—and perhaps another day's trouble—but for now, Rugnar let the smoke from his pipe curl into the rafters and surrendered to sleep, dreaming of wide fields and home.

The morning came grey and heavy, pressing down on the inn like a thick, wet blanket. Rugnar woke stiff and sore, his blanket tangled around his boots. He shook the sleep from his bones, rubbed his gritty eyes, and made his way to the counter, where Waru was already wiping mugs with a sour look.

"Ale," Rugnar said simply, tossing a silver coin onto the counter.

Waru filled a mug from the tap, the froth spilling down the side. Rugnar took it in one calloused hand, tipped it back, and gulped the whole thing down in one long pull. The room fell silent for a moment as a thunderous burp echoed off the timbered walls.

"By the gods, man," Waru muttered, shaking her head.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Rugnar chuckled low in his chest, turned on his heel, and stomped out into the morning fog.

Millie was waiting, stamping her feet impatiently. Rugnar hitched the wagon, gave the reins a sharp flick, and they rattled off down the rutted streets, out through the towering gates of Ironhelm, and onto the long, winding road toward Hollowbarn.

By mid-afternoon, they rolled into the familiar green fields of home. Rugnar unloaded his few goods, carried the heavy leather coin pouch into his cottage, and pried up a loose board in the floor with his belt knife. He slipped the pouch into the darkness below, then hammered the board back into place with the hilt of his short sword.

He counted out fifteen gold coins from a smaller pouch he kept at his belt and headed straight for Gerf's forge.

"Tools were worth every copper," Rugnar said, tossing the bag of coins onto the anvil.

Gerf grinned broadly, wiping his hands on his apron. "Good man, Rugnar. They'll last ye longer than your bones will."

With business settled, Rugnar returned home, strapped on his hunting gear—short sword, worn leather armor, and a stout hunting bow—and set off into the woods.

The forest was alive with the chirr of cicadas and the whisper of leaves. Rugnar moved quietly, catching a few squirrels with well-placed shots, stuffing them into a burlap sack slung over his shoulder. As he walked the narrow road back toward the village, the peaceful rustle of the woods was broken by a sharp whistle.

Six rough men stepped onto the path ahead, blocking his way. They were a filthy lot—patched armor, crooked grins, and hands resting too casually on the hilts of their weapons.

"Ho there, old warrior," the biggest of them said, a scar crossing his nose. "Leave your gold and your weapons, and we'll let you keep your boots."

Rugnar spat into the dirt.

"Come and try, you piss-scuttled thieves," he growled, drawing his short sword in a fluid motion.

The bandits lunged forward. Rugnar sidestepped the first with a grunt, slashing across the man’s belly, sending him sprawling. Another swung a rusty sword, but Rugnar ducked low, driving his shoulder into the man's gut and sending him toppling.

Two tried to come at him from either side. Rugnar backed against a tree, parrying one blow and kicking the other man square in the knee. Bones cracked, and the bandit screamed, falling to the ground.

Scar-Nose roared and charged, a crude axe raised high. Rugnar met him head-on, their blades ringing in the quiet woods. Rugnar twisted, knocked the axe wide, and buried his short sword deep into Scar-Nose’s ribs.

The last two, seeing the carnage, turned to run—but Rugnar wasn't about to let them. He dropped one with an arrow to the back, and the other he caught by the cloak, dragging him down and finishing him with a swift cut.

Breathing hard, Rugnar wiped his blade clean on the grass. He searched the bodies, finding a scattering of battered coins and broken gear. All told, he found eleven gold pieces, which he stuffed into his pocket with a grunt of satisfaction.

Whistling a rough tune, he strolled home as if nothing had happened, the squirrels swinging from his belt.

Back at his cottage, Rugnar stowed the squirrels for skinning later. He stomped down into his cool cellar, grabbed a mug, and drew a full draft of his dark ale from a barrel. He downed it in one long, greedy pull, slamming the mug back onto the wooden counter with a loud thud, his vision swimming pleasantly.

"That's the stuff," he muttered, wiping foam from his beard.

Feeling lightheaded and good-humored, Rugnar gathered handfuls of fresh-cut pipeweed from the patch he had planted earlier in the year. He bundled it together with twine and hung the green leaves along the southern wall of his cottage, where the warm afternoon sun would dry them just right.

As he pinned the last bundle, Rugnar leaned against the wall, squinting at the wide fields beyond his yard.

"Another good day," he said to no one in particular. "Another day worth living."

The evening light caught the fresh leaves as they fluttered gently in the breeze, and the soft scent of the growing pipeweed filled the warm air around his home.

The days turned easy and steady for Rugnar. He spent a handful of them making the rounds through nearby villages, gathering up cheap goods wherever he found a bargain—rolls of coarse cloth, jars of preserved fruits, some old iron nails and simple pottery. His wagon filled steadily, the mule grunting under the growing load.

When his wagon was full, Rugnar turned back home, unloaded and sorted the new stock, then packed it again for market day. This time he added bundles of his freshly dried pipeweed, the green leaves fragrant and neatly tied in little cloth rolls. His ale was ready too, dark and heavy as a stone, and his remaining hides were brushed and rolled tight.

Before the first light touched the hills, Rugnar hitched Millie to the wagon and set off toward Ironhelm. The road was quiet in the chill morning air, the trees standing dark and heavy with mist.

By midmorning, he rattled into the market square. He paid the usual one silver piece for a stand and set out his goods, laying them with the eye of a man who knew what would catch a buyer's fancy. The pipeweed bundles sat up front, the ale casks set behind, and the fine rolled hides hanging over the wagon rails to catch the eye.

The day was long and busy. His ale sold fast, mugs passed from hand to hand as laughter filled the air. Merchants from the richer districts came sniffing after his pipeweed, praising its smell and paying well. A dwarven foreman bought three of his hides for a mining company needing new leather goods, and several rolls of cloth went to a stout halfling tailor with sharp eyes and quicker hands.

By sunset, Rugnar's coin pouch was heavy. He counted carefully when the last coppers were tucked away—one hundred twenty-six gold pieces earned clean and proper.

Whistling a rough tune under his breath, Rugnar drove his now light wagon into a quieter part of the city, aiming for a night's rest before the journey home. He found himself in a residential district where the homes were carved with ancient runes, their stones old but still proud. Goats wandered freely in the narrow streets, nosing at scraps and bleating at passersby.

A half-timbered building with a crooked sign swinging above the door caught his eye—The King's Flail.

The place was small, rough around the edges, with a few shuttered windows and a yard full of mud and goat droppings. Rugnar tied up Millie, gave her a scratch between the ears, and stepped inside.

The interior was dimly lit by a sputtering hearth and a handful of wall torches. Crude tables and benches were scattered around, and a line of hammocks swayed gently in the common room where the accommodations lay. Behind the counter stood a stout female elf with sharp eyes and a hard smile.

"Name's Eli," she said without offering her hand. "Two silver for a hammock, and mind your pockets."

Rugnar tossed two silvers onto the bar and nodded.

"Ale?" he asked.

"Strong and bitter," Eli said, filling a battered mug and slamming it onto the counter.

The inn was nearly empty. At one table, a short, overweight human woman with copper hair —Waerha, someone called her—was throwing darts at a makeshift board hammered onto a barrel. She missed more often than she hit but cursed colorfully enough to earn a few chuckles.

In a far corner sat Fifu Arerdotr, a silver-haired dwarf priest who clutched her mug with tight, anxious fingers, flinching every time someone unsheathed a blade. Rugnar figured she'd seen too much blood and not enough peace.

Near the hearth, a golden-haired dwarf named Bali was engaged in a heated argument with a group of other dwarves, their voices rising over some slight or insult not easily forgiven.

Rugnar leaned against the wall, sipping the bitter ale, listening to the talk around him. Rumors floated through the smoky air.

"...Temple of Angels... a thieves' den, plain as day..."

"...idiots set fire to the Cloister, nearly burned the whole street..."

"...miners dug up some lost city in the Dagger Hills. Said to be cursed, full of gold and old things better left buried..."

Rugnar tucked the whispers away in the back of his mind. In his life, gold and curses usually walked hand in hand.

After finishing his drink, Rugnar found an empty hammock near the hearth, his sword laid close by, and stretched out with a sigh. Tomorrow he'd be home again, the fields green and his cellar full. But tonight, the city hummed around him—full of secrets, dangers, and promises yet to unfold.

Morning came heavy and mean. Rugnar woke with his mouth dry as stone and his head pounding like a forge hammer. Still, he grunted himself upright from the hammock, dragged his boots on, and made straight for the bar where Eli was wiping down mugs with a rag that looked as dirty as the floor.

"Ale," Rugnar croaked, his voice rough with sleep.

Eli poured without a word. Rugnar slammed one mug back in a single gulp, then another, the bitter brew hitting his empty stomach like a boulder. The world tilted slightly as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Food too," he said, tossing a few copper coins on the counter.

Eli set down a battered wooden plate filled with some greasy stew and a hunk of bread. Rugnar grabbed it up and made his way toward an empty table near the hearth.

As he moved, a halfling man with a nervous, darting gaze approached, hands wringing in front of him.

"Uh, sir," the halfling stammered, his voice oily and quick. "Might you have some... some pipeweed for sale? Fine day for it, eh?"

Rugnar grunted, already half thinking about the food in his hands.

"Maybe," he said, reaching for his pouch to consider the matter.

Before he could blink, the halfling’s hand flashed out, snatched the heavy coin purse from Rugnar’s belt, and darted toward the door like a rat down a drain.

It took Rugnar a moment to register what had happened. His vision swimming from the ale, he tried to give chase—but his boot caught the leg of a stool, his arms flailed wide, and the plate of stew sailed through the air before Rugnar crashed face-first onto the floor. Food splattered everywhere, and the room erupted into laughter.

"Thievin' little maggot!" Rugnar roared, scrambling up, stew dripping from his tunic.

He barreled out the door after the halfling, pushing through a crowd of confused onlookers, scattering goats and crates alike. The narrow streets twisted and turned, the walls of rune-carved houses looming on either side. The halfling darted through an alley, knocked over a stack of baskets, and disappeared around a corner.

"Move, damn ye!" Rugnar barked, shoving aside a pair of merchants.

He pounded after the thief, boots thudding against the cobblestones, vision still spinning slightly from the morning's ale. Ahead, the halfling, seeing Rugnar gaining ground, panicked. He tossed the coin purse high into the air, letting it land with a wet splat in the middle of a muddy street before ducking into a crowd and vanishing like smoke.

Rugnar skidded to a halt, scooped up the filthy coin purse, and spat a curse.

"Little worm's lucky," he growled, tying the pouch back to his belt. "Next time, I'll tan his hide myself."

He stomped back toward the inn, brushing mud and stew from his clothes, looking every inch the storm he felt boiling inside.

Inside, the King's Flail was even noisier than when he had left. Bali, the golden-haired dwarf entertainer, was still seated with two other rough-looking dwarves, and now their voices were louder and drunker. As Rugnar passed by, one of them snickered.

"Look at the stew-faced fool," Bali called out, his voice high and mocking. "Lost yer breakfast, old man? Maybe ye lost yer purse too?"

His companions roared with laughter, pounding their mugs on the table.

Rugnar stopped cold, his hand clenching into a fist.

"Say that again," he said, voice low and dangerous.

"I said," Bali sneered, standing up and wobbling a little, "yer a stew-faced fool who can't hold his drink—or his coin."

Rugnar didn't answer. He let his fist answer for him, driving forward like a piledriver straight into Bali's nose. The dwarf staggered back, blood spurting, crashing into the table.

The other two dwarves leapt up, fists swinging. Rugnar caught a punch to the side of his head, stars bursting behind his eyes, but he roared and drove his shoulder into the nearest one, sending him sprawling over a bench. The third landed a hard blow against Rugnar's nose—blood streamed down—but Rugnar barely flinched.

He grabbed the dwarf by the tunic, lifted him clean off his feet, and slammed him into the wall with a thud that rattled the torches.

Bali tried to scramble up, but Rugnar was on him, pummeling him with hammering fists until the dwarf curled up like a kicked dog.

When it was done, Rugnar stood there breathing hard, blood dripping from his nose, a bump swelling above his left eye, but smiling through it all. The three dwarves groaned in a pile around the smashed furniture.

Eli leaned on the bar, smirking.

"Clean up your mess, or pay for it," she said dryly.

Rugnar wiped his nose on his sleeve, tossed a handful of silver onto the counter, and grunted.

"Better furniture than company."

He turned, grabbed a fresh mug of ale without asking, and sat by the hearth, his bruises already starting to pulse but his heart lighter.

It was shaping up to be one hell of a day.

Road Home

The road home stretched wide and golden before Rugnar, the wagon wheels bumping softly along the old, rutted trail that wound like a lazy river through the rolling grasslands. The sun was warm on his shoulders, and the tall grasses on either side of the road whispered in the gentle wind, waving like a green ocean. Wildflowers bloomed in bright clusters along the verge—yellow, purple, and blue—and dragonflies zipped above little pools of water left from last week's rain. It was a fine day, the kind that made the bones loosen and the heart remember simpler joys.

Ahead, Rugnar spotted a lone traveler making her way down the road. She was a dwarf, clad in gleaming half-plate armor that caught the sunlight in muted flashes. Her black hair was tied back into a rough braid, and her dark blue eyes were keen and steady. A warhammer hung easily at her side, its polished head knocking lightly against her hip as she walked.

Rugnar tugged on Millie’s reins, slowing the mule. He raised a hand in greeting.

"Well met, traveler!" he called out.

The dwarf woman smiled and raised her own hand in answer. "And well met to you, wagon-man."

As Rugnar drew closer, he saw the lines of weariness at the corners of her eyes but also the strong set of her shoulders. She was no stranger to hard roads or hard times.

"Name’s Rugnar," he said. "Trader by work, farmer by blood."

"Thori," she replied, resting a gauntleted hand on the wagon's side. "Fighter by trade. Wanderer, as of late."

They spoke a bit about trading, and Thori’s eye was soon drawn to one of the clay vases sitting carefully packed among Rugnar’s goods.

"Fine work, that one," she said, tracing a finger lightly over the patterned side. "How much for it?"

"For you, five silver," Rugnar said with a grin. "And a good tale to go with it."

Thori chuckled and handed over the coins without haggling, slipping the vase into a leather satchel at her side.

The talk drifted naturally to other things, as it often did between those who shared the road. They spoke of the cities they'd seen, the rough villages and wild woods, and then, as if pulled by an unseen hand, the subject turned to war.

"I served up north," Rugnar said quietly, his voice carrying a weight of memory. "Seven years in the king's colors. Saw enough death to last three lives."

Thori's smile faded a little, her eyes darkening.

"My brother fought there," she said. "Didn't come back. Lost near the Cold River, they told me."

Rugnar gave a slow, respectful nod. "I was there," he said. "It was a bitter place for good men to die."

For a while, they rode in companionable silence, the clop of Millie's hooves and the creak of the wagon filling the space between them. But there was a warmth now, a quiet understanding that words did not need to fill.

"You got a place nearby?" Thori asked, glancing at him.

"Aye," Rugnar said. "Cottage and fields just over yonder hill. If you've a mind, you're welcome to share a mug of good dark ale before you go wanderin' further."

Thori smiled, the first true smile of the day. "Ale sounds about right."

They drove on together, and before long the familiar orchards and fields of Hollowbarn came into view. Rugnar pulled up beside his cottage, unhitched Millie, and ushered Thori inside. He poured two deep mugs of ale, the thick, dark brew foaming richly as he handed her one.

"Here's to fallen kin, and those who still stand," Rugnar said, lifting his mug.

"To both," Thori answered, clinking her mug against his.

The evening wore on with easy talk. They spoke of the world beyond the hills, of old kings and lost cities, of battles fought and friends left behind. Thori laughed at Rugnar's stories of clumsy bandits and drunken goats, and Rugnar listened intently as Thori told of strange lands beyond the mountains, of beasts he had never seen and places he could barely imagine.

As the night deepened and the fire burned low, their talk slowed, and the air grew heavier between them. Thori's eyes glinted in the firelight, and Rugnar felt a heat rise in his chest that had little to do with the ale.

"You're not planning to ride out tonight, are you?" he asked, voice low.

Thori shook her head slowly, setting her empty mug aside. "Not unless you throw me out."

Rugnar stood, offering his hand.

"Then stay."

She took it without a word, and he led her to the simple bed tucked against the wall. There were no grand words spoken, no promises, just the shared comfort of two souls who had walked too many lonely roads. Their kisses were rough and eager at first, then softened into something slower, more patient. Rugnar pulled away her armor piece by piece, letting it fall to the floor with heavy thuds, revealing the strong, scarred woman beneath.

Thori's hands moved with surety, unbuckling Rugnar's worn tunic, tracing the lines of old wounds and old battles. They tumbled together into the bed, the world beyond the cottage walls forgotten.

In the small hours of the night, as the fire faded to embers, Rugnar and Thori lay tangled together beneath a rough woolen blanket, the steady sound of each other's breathing the only music left in the dark.

Morning light crept through the wooden shutters, casting long lines across the floorboards. Rugnar woke slowly, the familiar ache of hard living in his joints but a new, pleasant warmth beside him. Thori stirred, pulling her braid over one shoulder and sitting up, her half-plate gleaming dully in the early light where it lay scattered across the floor.

Rugnar swung his legs off the bed and stretched, a satisfied grunt rumbling from his chest.

Thori smiled and reached into her pack, pulling out a worn scrap of parchment. She slapped it down on the table with a heavy hand.

"Got something to show you," she said.

Rugnar raised an eyebrow and wandered over, leaning down to study the rough lines and faded ink. It showed a part of the High Forest, a tangled corner deep and wild. A crude X was marked near a twisting riverbend.

"Bought it from a hooded rat in a tavern," Thori said, tapping the map with a finger. "Said he stole it off a merchant's caravan that was ambushed. Paid fifty gold for it. Could be treasure. Could be nothin'. But I mean to find out."

Rugnar scratched his beard thoughtfully, then grinned.

"Sounds mad enough to be worth doin'," he said. "I'll go with ye."

They packed quickly, tossing dried meats, hard bread, a length of rope, and a small cooking pot and shovel into Rugnar's battered backpack. Rugnar strapped on his leather armor, slung his short sword at his hip, and tucked a hunting knife into his belt. Thori donned her half-plate again, the metal singing softly as she fastened the straps and hefted her warhammer.

After a quick breakfast of bread and cold ale, they set off. The road to the High Forest was damp from a night's rain, and by the time they reached the treeline, the sun was lost behind a thick blanket of clouds.

They followed a narrow footpath into the woods, the trees crowding close on either side. Their trunks were thick, ancient things, gnarled like the fingers of old men. The forest floor was a carpet of wet leaves and twisted roots. Little light filtered through the canopy, and the deeper they went, the dimmer it became. Every so often, a distant branch would creak in the wind, a sound that seemed to come from all directions at once.

They walked in silence, the only sounds the squelch of their boots in the mud and the steady drip of rain beginning to fall from the heavy sky.

Suddenly, the path bent around a massive oak, and three hulking figures loomed out of the misty gloom. Half-ogres, each nearly a head taller than Rugnar, their skin a sickly shade of gray-green, their eyes small and mean. They wore rough patchworks of fur and hide, and each carried a heavy club of gnarled wood.

The nearest one grunted something guttural, spit dribbling down his chin. Another swung his club lazily through the air toward Thori, a mocking gesture—but the menace was plain.

Rugnar snarled, drawing his short sword.

"Damn you beasts of the maggots!" he roared.

The half-ogres bellowed in reply, and the fight burst into motion.

Thori stepped forward first, swinging her warhammer in a brutal arc. It caught the lead half-ogre in the thigh with a crunch of bone. He howled and stumbled, but didn’t fall.

The second ogre came at Rugnar, club swinging down in a wide, brutal arc. Rugnar rolled to the side, mud splattering his armor, and slashed at the ogre's leg as he passed. Blood welled up, dark and thick.

The third ogre lumbered in, trying to flank them. Thori spun, her warhammer smashing across his jaw with a wet, cracking sound. Teeth flew from the creature’s mouth as he reeled backward, growling and clutching his face.

The first ogre, still stumbling, swung blindly at Thori. The blow glanced off her half-plate with a loud clang, and she answered with a vicious overhead strike that smashed the creature's shoulder. He went down on one knee, gasping.

Rugnar squared off against the second ogre. The brute lunged, swinging the club low. Rugnar ducked, closed the distance, and drove his sword into the ogre’s gut, twisting it deep. The beast grunted, staggered, then toppled heavily into the mud.

The third ogre, enraged, charged Thori, but Rugnar lunged forward, slashing at the back of its knee. It buckled, and Thori seized the moment, swinging her warhammer two-handed into the creature's skull. The half-ogre dropped without a sound, face-first into the wet leaves.

The clearing fell silent but for the rain, falling harder now, washing the blood into thin rivulets that ran down the path.

Rugnar wiped his sword clean on the nearest fallen brute and straightened, wincing slightly at a sharp ache in his ribs.

"Ugly bastards," he muttered, spitting into the mud.

Thori laughed, short and fierce. "Ugly, slow, and dead. Best kind."

They looked at each other for a moment, both breathing hard, both grinning despite the bruises and scrapes.

"Still want to find that treasure?" Rugnar asked.

Thori grinned wider, hoisting her hammer over her shoulder. "Now more than ever."

They turned back to the trail, leaving the broken bodies behind them, the deep, dark forest swallowing them once more as they pressed on toward whatever fortune—or folly—lay ahead.

The path twisted deeper into the forest, the trees growing thicker and closer together, their gnarled branches interlocking overhead like the ribs of some ancient beast. The light grew dim, almost twilight even though it was midday, and the air grew heavy with the smell of damp earth and rotting leaves. The path itself turned muddy, sucking at Rugnar’s boots with each step.

Ahead of him, Thori cursed under her breath as she slipped, landing face-first with a loud splat into a deep patch of mud.

"Blasted, cursed muck!" she growled, struggling to get her feet under her.

Rugnar couldn't help but laugh, stepping forward and offering her a hand. He hauled her upright with a firm yank, mud dripping from her armor.

"Yer a vision of grace, Thori," Rugnar said, grinning wide.

"Shut it," she muttered, but a small smile tugged at her mouth as she wiped her face with the edge of her cloak.

They pressed on, the path narrowing until it was little more than a game trail. After a time, the dark trees thinned slightly, and through the heavy mist, an old crumpled cottage came into view. The roof sagged dangerously, and the walls leaned like a drunk after too many mugs of ale. Ivy and moss covered much of the stone, and a half-broken door swung lazily in the damp breeze.

Thori pulled out the map, her gloved fingers tracing the rough sketch. She pointed to a spot marked with an X at the outer corner of the cottage.

"Here," she said. "This is it."

Rugnar nodded, shrugging off his pack and pulling free a small shovel he had brought along. He jabbed it into the soft earth, the mud squelching under his boots. Thori joined in with her

hands, clawing away at the wet dirt. They dug steadily, the sound of their work muffled by the heavy, wet air.

After about half a meter, Rugnar's shovel struck something solid with a hollow thunk.

"Aha!" Rugnar said, excitement lighting his eyes.

They cleared the dirt away and hauled out a small, rotted wooden box. Thori pried it open with the point of her dagger. Inside, nestled in a layer of old cloth, was a scattering of coins—fourteen gold pieces—and a tarnished silver ring.

Rugnar stared at it for a moment, then threw back his head and let out a booming laugh.

"By Moradin's beard, we've struck the king's ransom!" he bellowed. "Fourteen bloody gold and a ring that's worth a mug of ale at best!"

Thori chuckled too, wiping mud from her forehead.

"Well, at least it paid for the exercise."

Just then, a sharp sound of hooves on wet earth echoed down the path. From the misty trail, two centaurs emerged—tall, powerful figures with torsos of men and bodies of horses, spears gripped tightly in their hands. Their long hair hung wet and tangled, and their dark eyes were fixed coldly on Rugnar and Thori.

One of them stepped forward, his voice deep and challenging.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "This land belongs to us! The High Forest is not for plunderers."

Rugnar straightened, wiping mud from his hands, his voice steady.

"Just digging up a bit of old rot. Nothing that belongs to you, beast."

Thori, fists on her hips, added sharply, "The High Forest belongs to everyone, not just to those who stamp their hooves loudest."

The centaur narrowed his eyes, his knuckles whitening around his spear.

"You trespass. You steal from sacred ground. For that, you must pay!"

Tension crackled like a storm ready to break. Rugnar spat into the mud.

"Try it, horse-bastard."

With a roar, the centaurs charged, spears leveled. Thori barely had time to draw her warhammer before the first spear thrust was upon her. It caught her in the thigh, a deep, burning wound that made her stumble back, gritting her teeth in pain.

Rugnar parried the second centaur's thrust with his short sword, but the sheer strength of the blow drove him back. A second spear jabbed forward, glancing off his armor but tearing into his side. Blood soaked into his tunic, warm and sticky.

"Stay on yer feet!" Rugnar shouted, rallying.

Thori, grimacing through the pain, swung her warhammer low, catching the first centaur's horse-legs and knocking him off balance. Rugnar lunged, driving his sword deep into the

centaur’s flank. The creature screamed, thrashing wildly, and went down in a spray of blood and mud.

The second centaur fought viciously, his spear whirling in deadly arcs. Thori took another hit to the shoulder, the blow numbing her arm, but she roared in defiance, swinging her hammer in a wide, brutal arc that caught the centaur across the ribs.

Rugnar closed in, ignoring the burning pain in his side. With a grim snarl, he slashed across the centaur's chest, the blade biting deep. The centaur faltered, dropping his spear, and Thori finished him with a crushing blow to the head.

The forest fell silent again, save for their ragged breathing and the hiss of rain.

Rugnar dropped to one knee, pressing a hand to his bleeding side. Thori fumbled at her belt and pulled free a small glass vial.

"Here," she panted, handing it to him. "Healing potion."

They both took a few gulps, the potion's warmth spreading through them like fire, knitting flesh and steadying their breath.

As they sat there catching their breath, Rugnar noticed a small leather pouch tied to the first centaur's belt. He cut it free and opened it. His eyes widened.

"Well, I’ll be," he muttered.

He poured the contents into his palm—thick, heavy gold coins gleamed even in the rain. Sixty gold pieces.

They split it without argument, each tucking thirty gold safely into their pouches.

Thori clapped Rugnar on the back with a wince. "Well," she said with a weary grin, "at least today wasn't a complete loss."

Rugnar chuckled, his voice deep and rough. "Aye. Bled a bit, bruised a bit, but heavier in the purse. All in a day's work."

They stood slowly, favoring their wounds, and looked down the dark, misty path still stretching ahead into the unknown.

They set off back the way they had come, the heavy forest pressing in around them, the mist still clinging low to the ground. But somewhere along the twisting trails and broken landmarks, they missed a turn. The paths all looked alike in the gloom, and before they knew it, they were wandering aimlessly among the towering trees.

“Should’ve marked the blasted trees,” Rugnar grunted after an hour of trudging through thick mud and hanging vines.

“I thought you knew the way,” Thori teased, smirking as she swatted a branch out of her face.

After nearly two hours of fumbling through the woods, they stumbled into a clearing—and there, standing before them, were two hobgoblins. One was armored in cruel iron and robes, crackling with the faint scent of magic: a Hobgoblin Devastator, his hands already weaving a dangerous spell. Beside him stood a battle-scarred hobgoblin soldier, gripping a jagged blade and snarling.

The Devastator barked something guttural and hurled a bolt of searing fire toward them. Rugnar shoved Thori aside, the firebolt hissing past their heads and exploding against a tree in a shower of sparks.

"Damn black-hearted mages!" Rugnar roared, drawing his sword.

Thori rushed the soldier first, warhammer swinging in a deadly arc. She smashed into the hobgoblin’s shield, knocking him back, but not before he slashed her shoulder, the blade tearing through her cloak.

Rugnar ducked a second firebolt from the Devastator and charged him directly. The Devastator shouted an incantation, and a blast of force hurled Rugnar backward into the mud. Gritting his teeth, Rugnar scrambled up, his side burning, and closed the distance, slashing at the mage’s legs.

The Devastator stumbled, howling, and raised his hands for another spell, but Rugnar drove his blade deep into the hobgoblin’s gut, ending the threat with a final, wet gasp.

Thori and the hobgoblin soldier circled each other, both bloodied and breathing hard. The hobgoblin lunged clumsily, and Thori sidestepped, bringing her warhammer down with a wet crack onto the creature’s spine. He crumpled to the ground without a sound.

Both Rugnar and Thori stood there, panting, their wounds bleeding freely.

Rugnar wiped his sword on the dead mage's robes and searched the bodies. In a pouch tied to the Devastator's belt, they found forty gold coins. Hanging around the soldier's neck was a crude necklace strung with human teeth, and a plain wooden ring carved with a twisting serpent design.

"Charming," Thori muttered, kicking the necklace away with the tip of her boot.

Rugnar uncorked another healing potion and handed it to her first. They shared the potion, grimacing at the bitter taste, and soon their wounds closed enough for them to press on.

They found their way back to the true path by late afternoon, tired and sore, but in better spirits.

At Rugnar's cottage, the home fire was rekindled. Thori set to cooking while Rugnar stowed their new treasures and cleaned their gear. She threw thick slices of boar meat onto the hearth's griddle, slicing up some carrots and onions into a battered old pot with a side of crusty bread.

They sat at the rough-hewn table, mugs of ale at their elbows, tearing into the meal like wolves.

Between mouthfuls, Rugnar leaned back and said, "Been thinkin'. Need to build a barn behind the house. With the fields growing, the animals I'm startin' to gather, I need proper space."

Thori wiped her mouth and grinned. "Sounds like work. Good kind."

The next morning, Rugnar gathered the village folk at the old ash tree in the village square. With a little coin and a lot of goodwill, they came together. Over the course of a week, they built the barn: a stone foundation set first, stout beams hewn from the nearby forest, the roof thatched thick and strong. The yard was fenced off with split logs and wire, strong enough to hold even the orneriest boar.

When it was finished, Rugnar and Thori hitched Millie to the wagon and set off for a nearby village. After a bit of haggling and trading, they returned with four sheep, three pigs, and two chickens all bundled into the wagon, squawking and bleating all the way home.

Once there, Rugnar opened the fence gate and let the animals into their new home. The pigs rooted happily in the mud, the chickens clucked and scratched at the dirt, and the sheep set to nibbling at the grass.

"Hope they know how to behave," Rugnar muttered, watching a pig chase a chicken in circles.

In the days that followed, the farmyard came to life. The chickens began laying eggs, the sheep thickened with wool, and Thori and Rugnar worked side by side. They spent long days cutting hay in the meadows, swinging heavy scythes through the tall grass under the hot sun, stacking and bundling it to dry for winter feed.

Each evening, sore and sunburnt, they sat on the bench outside the cottage, drinking cool ale and watching the fields ripple under the orange skies.

The days rolled by in a steady rhythm of earth and sky. Rugnar and Thori, shoulder to shoulder, settled into the honest labor of country life. Morning light found them often before the sun had fully risen, the mist still clinging low to the fields. Rugnar would be out feeding the pigs, tossing slops into the wooden troughs while the animals grunted and jostled each other.

"Yer worse than tavern drunks," Rugnar muttered, watching the pigs fight over a bruised apple.

Thori laughed from the sheep pens where she was tossing handfuls of hay into the racks. "And cleaner, too."

When the chores at the barn were done, they joined the other village folk in the fields. Together they worked in long rows, pulling out weeds by hand to keep the barley and wheat growing strong. Rugnar, on hands and knees, yanked a stubborn thistle from the ground and held it up.

"Look at this ugly devil," he said, shaking it at Thori. "Thinks it's got a right to live here."

"Give it a burial in the muck," Thori said, grinning as she tossed another handful of weeds into the barrow.

Some afternoons, they hitched Millie to the wagon and rode down to the river to fish. Rugnar sat on the bank with a crude rod in hand, the line bobbing gently in the current.

"Bet I catch two before you get one," Thori challenged, threading a worm onto her hook.

"You'll be eatin' grass before you beat me at fishin'," Rugnar shot back.

Hours would pass with the splash of fish in the water and the quiet murmur of the river. Sometimes they caught enough trout and river perch to fill a basket; other days they went home empty-handed, but always laughing.

Hunting trips were longer affairs. Rugnar and Thori would head into the woods with their bows slung over their backs, moving silently through the trees. They tracked deer, snared rabbits, and once, together with two other farmers, they brought down a fat wild boar that took four spears and three men to wrestle into submission.

When the hunt was good, Rugnar set about curing the hides. He built a tanning rack behind the barn, scraping the flesh clean from the skins and soaking them in ash-water to preserve them.

"Stinks to high heaven," Thori said once, wrinkling her nose as she helped stretch a fresh deer hide.

"That's the smell of money, love," Rugnar replied, grinning behind his thick beard.

Often, the work wasn’t just theirs alone. The village came together for big jobs. When the orchard needed pruning, Rugnar climbed the old ladders while Thori and Mara gathered the trimmed branches below. When a new section of fencing had to be built to keep in the young lambs, every able-bodied villager came with hammer and nails, laughing and singing as they worked.

One afternoon, while patching the north fence, Bren the young farmer wiped his brow and called out, "If I fix one more blasted post, I’ll start growin’ bark myself!"

"Better bark than a mouth full o’ wind," Rugnar barked back, drawing a round of laughter from the workers.

Evenings were their time. After the sun dipped low and the work was done, Rugnar and Thori would sit under the old oak by the cottage, sharing mugs of cool ale, their hands raw but their hearts full. Sometimes a few neighbors would wander by, bringing a loaf of bread or a jug of cider, and they would pass the night swapping tales, singing rough songs, and watching the stars rise.

Under the quiet sky, Rugnar would sometimes catch Thori’s eye and see in her the same hard-earned peace that had finally settled over him.

"This is better than all the gold in the north," he said one evening, the smoke from his pipe curling into the air.

Thori leaned against him, her voice soft. "Aye. This is the real treasure."

And so the days passed, rich with the simple, honest work that stitched the lives of Hollowbarn's folk together, one hard-earned day at a time.

The sun broke over the fields as Rugnar and Thori hitched Millie to the wagon, loading it carefully with bundles of cured hides, sacks of barley flour, jugs of fresh ale, and hand-tied bundles of pipeweed. With everything strapped down tight, they set off down the familiar road to Ironhelm, the wagon creaking and swaying behind them.

The road was busy with traders and travelers this time of year, the late summer bringing in those looking to fill their stores before the cold months. The golden grasslands rolled away to either side, and the distant peaks loomed like sleeping giants.

By midday, they passed under the massive stone archways of Ironhelm’s outer wall. The market was already humming with life, but Rugnar could tell it wasn't one of the livelier days. The air was thick, and a sense of sluggishness hung over the crowds.

They spent hours in the square. Rugnar set out the goods carefully, pipeweed tied in neat rolls, the ale jugs polished to a deep shine. Thori took the lead on the hides, holding them up for passing buyers to see.

But the customers were few and far between today. Most people wandered past their booth, casting idle glances but moving on. They sold a few jugs of ale, a couple bundles of pipeweed, and one sack of flour to an elderly woman who haggled so fiercely Rugnar thought she might wrestle him for it.

By late afternoon, Rugnar wiped the sweat from his brow and muttered, "Market's dead. We'll be lucky to break even after the stall fee."

Thori nodded, handing a few coins into his palm. "A day's a day. Some fat, some lean."

As the sun dipped behind Ironhelm's battlements, they packed up what little they had left and decided to find a bed for the night. This time, Rugnar had no wish to return to the rough inns near the caravan district. Instead, they made their way to the Cask and Toad, a much more respectable establishment nestled in the market ward, surrounded by noisy inns and shadowed alleys.

The Cask and Toad was a two-storey half-timbered building with leaded glass windows and unusually high ceilings. A low stone wall lined the street outside, and a few goats dozed peacefully in its shade.

Inside, the inn was warm and lively but far from the chaotic dens Rugnar had stumbled into in the past. Several small tables were scattered across the room, the smell of vegetable stew and fresh bread filling the air.

Behind the counter stood an old female dwarf with a mop of wild white hair, polishing a mug with fierce energy. Her name, they learned, was Frinain.

"Rooms're three silver a night," Frinain said, voice gravelly but not unkind. "You get a cot and a lock on your door. Food's extra."

Rugnar paid the coins without grumbling this time, glad to have a proper roof over his head.

They took a table near a window, the light spilling in soft and golden. Around them, the inn's patrons carried on in low conversation: Rimra, a halfling woman with a broken smile, sat hunched over a book; Eatiel, an elf in a red cloak, watched the room with wounded eyes; Andes, another halfling wrapped in a wolf fur cape, leaned heavily on a walking stick; and Olwyd, a heavyset human woman in a dragonscale cloak, laughed too loudly at something the soldier, Thony Teray, muttered. A pale elf entertainer plucked idly at a lute in the corner, her fingers trailing over broken melodies.

Thori flagged down a young serving girl.

"Vegetable stew and two mugs of perry," she said. "And make it hot."

The food came quickly—a thick, steaming stew heavy with carrots and onions, and two heavy earthenware mugs of perry, the sweet scent of pears rising with the steam.

Rugnar dipped his spoon into the stew, chewing thoughtfully.

"Better than the last place I stayed," he said, chuckling.

Thori laughed low. "Anything's better than mud and fleas."

They ate slowly, the simple food warming their tired bodies. Around them, the talk of the inn drifted like smoke.

"You hear?" someone said at a nearby table. "Quartermasters Fellowship is looking for mercenaries again. Good coin, if you don’t mind blood."

"And Gauwalt the castellan—" another voice added, laughing. "—spent all his treasury on mead and ale! Fools’ll be begging for steel before winter."

Rugnar drained his mug and leaned back, feeling the aches of the long day settle into his bones.

"Could be opportunities," he said to Thori, voice low.

"Could be trouble," she answered, smiling over her mug.

"Most good things are," Rugnar said.

They clinked their mugs together and let the warmth of the food, the drink, and the quiet evening sink into their bones, while outside the dark streets of Ironhelm churned on, filled with noise, shadow, and distant promise.

The Cask and Toad had settled into a lazy murmur. Candles guttered low in their sconces, and the fire at the hearth burned down to a bed of glowing coals. Rugnar and Thori sat tucked away in a corner booth, mugs of beer cradled in their calloused hands, the half-light casting soft shadows over their faces.

Their earlier talk about the market goods drifted from grumbling over slow sales to reflections on quality and craft.

"Folk these days don’t know a good hide from a wet blanket," Rugnar said, sipping slowly. "Half of 'em wouldn’t know fine pipeweed if it set their beard alight."

Thori laughed, swirling the beer in her mug. "Aye, but I figure it’s the honest work that matters, not how quick it sells."

Rugnar grunted agreement, then leaned back, folding his arms behind his head.

"You never did tell me, Thori," he said, eyeing her over the rim of his mug. "Where do you come from?"

Thori set her mug down, stretching out her legs under the table.

"Mudhog," she said, a smile tugging at her lips. "Half a week’s travel east o' here. Small place. Dirt roads, low hills, and pigs everywhere you look. Folks there are stubborn as stone and twice as thick."

Rugnar chuckled. "Sounds like Hollowbarn’s long-lost cousin."

She laughed too, then grew a little more serious. "My old man, Borin, he was a stonecutter. Used to say there wasn’t a rock he couldn’t make sing. Taught me the hammer before I could even hold it proper. I’ve got three brothers... had three. Only one’s still breathin'. Lost on in the Northern war and other to a rockslide in the old quarry."

Rugnar listened quietly, nodding.

"Left Mudhog after my last brother passed. Couldn’t sit there waitin' for the hills to swallow me too. Took my hammer, took my boots, and went lookin' for something better. Found a lot of nothin'... and a lot of fights."

She shrugged, her voice light but carrying old wounds.

"And you, Rugnar? Always figured you for a man who grew from the dirt itself."

Rugnar smiled sadly and stared into his mug for a long moment before speaking.

"Not far off," he said. "Born and raised in Hollowbarn. Farm's been in the family since before anyone remembers. My folks—Agnar and Freida—were good people. Hard work, simple joys. They caught a bad winter when I was a lad, sickened fast. Common cold, that’s all it was. Took 'em both within a fortnight."

Thori frowned, leaning closer.

"Left me with a farm full of chores and a head full of confusion. Had no choice but to grow up fast. Ran the place best I could. Bartered goods when coin was short, patched roofs, mended fences. It was hard, but I learned the land like my own skin."

He paused, sipping his beer slowly.

"Then the king’s war banners came up. Needed strong backs for the northern front. Promises of pay, of land grants... I went. Seven years fightin' for fields of ice and stone. Saw men die over hills no one would even bother to name."

"And when it ended?" Thori asked gently.

"I came back," Rugnar said, voice rough. "Found Hollowbarn a ghost of what it had been. Half the men gone to war or worse. Farm still standing, though. Field still waiting. Guess I figured if the land hadn’t given up, neither would I."

Thori was silent for a time, nodding slowly.

"You and me," she said at last, raising her mug. "Both stubborn fools who don’t know when to lay down."

Rugnar chuckled low, a deep sound in the warm air, and clinked his mug against hers.

"Stubborn fools it is."

They sat there in the soft candlelight, the noise of the tavern fading into the background, two lives shaped by stone, soil, and sorrow, yet still here, still laughing, still standing.

Outside, the city of Ironhelm slumbered under the watch of ancient stone, but within that little corner of the Cask and Toad, Rugnar and Thori found something rare and good—a friendship forged not by blood or by oath, but by the simple, steady weight of shared stories.

As the candle burned lower between them, a figure approached their corner table, moving with a careful grace. Ebrias, the slim elf entertainer from earlier in the evening, stood with her hands clasped tightly before her, the dim light catching the worried lines on her face. Her tangled blonde hair framed sharp grey eyes that now seemed more desperate than distant.

"Excuse me," she said softly, her voice strained. "I couldn’t help overhearing. You... you run a farm, don’t you?"

Rugnar leaned back in his chair, studying her carefully. Thori kept her eyes on Ebrias as well, her fingers tapping idly against her mug.

"Aye," Rugnar said at last. "Hollowbarn, east past the Barrowfields."

Ebrias bit her lip. "I'm looking for work. My family's in trouble... debts piling up. If I don't start sending coin home, they'll lose everything."

Rugnar rubbed his chin thoughtfully, then nodded slowly.

"Could always use more hands," he said. "Ain't grand work, mind you. Pullin' weeds, feedin' animals, mendin' fences. I can offer twenty gold a month, plus your meals. You'd be sleepin' in the barn, hay bed, with the beasts."

Ebrias' face lit up, relief flooding her features.

"That's more than fair," she said quickly. "I'll take it. Thank you, sir. Truly."

Rugnar waved a hand. "Save yer 'sir' for the lordlings. Rugnar'll do."

He leaned forward, speaking more firmly.

"Hollowbarn's a ways out. You follow the trade road east, then take the old river path south when you see the split rock. Barn's the only one standing next to a big old oak. Can't miss it. Thori here'll be around to show you the ropes when I'm off tradin'."

Ebrias nodded eagerly, wringing her hands. "I'll leave at first light."

With that settled, Rugnar rose from the table, dusted off his tunic, and turned to Thori.

"Stay here, keep the seat warm. I've a few things to settle 'fore we head back."

Thori lifted her mug. "Don't drink the city dry while yer out."

Rugnar chuckled and headed out into the cool night streets, the city bustling even this late with merchants packing up stalls and nightfolk beginning their noisy wanderings.

First, he made his way to the Traders' Guild hall, a squat stone building near the market ward. Inside, a fat human clerk with tiny spectacles perched on his nose looked up from his ledger.

"Name?" the clerk asked, quill poised.

"Rugnar of Hollowbarn," Rugnar said.

"And you seek?"

"Listing as a merchant. Sellin' ale, hides, flour, farm goods."

The clerk scribbled something down in a ledger and handed Rugnar a small wooden plaque etched with a trade rune.

"Fifteen gold a month. Pay on the first day o' each month or face a fine."

Rugnar dug into his pouch, dropping fifteen shining gold coins onto the counter. The clerk swept them away into a coffer without so much as a glance and stamped a seal onto Rugnar's guild parchment.

"Welcome to the Fellowship of Traders," the clerk droned without emotion.

Business there settled, Rugnar walked several streets over to the Tax Hall, a dreary granite building that looked more like a mausoleum than a place of public business. He stood in a slow-moving line, shifting from foot to foot until a stern-faced dwarf woman waved him forward.

"Name and holding?" she barked.

"Rugnar. Hollowbarn. About fifteen acres, one barn, one cottage."

She scrawled furiously onto a parchment.

"Land fee's twenty gold a month. No delays. Failure to pay brings repossession orders."

Rugnar slid twenty gold across the counter with a grimace, feeling the weight of it leave his hand like pulling a tooth.

"Paid," the dwarf woman said, stamping another slip of parchment and sliding it to him with a shove. "Next month, same."

Pocketing the papers, Rugnar trudged back through the lively streets to the Cask and Toad, the tavern's windows glowing warmly against the night.

Thori was where he left her, lounging against the wall with an empty mug in front of her.

"You look lighter," she said, smirking as he sat back down.

"Lighter in coin, heavier in paperwork," Rugnar muttered, tossing the tax slip onto the table.

Thori snorted. "Welcome to life as a proper merchant, Rugnar."

He leaned back, mug in hand once more, the warmth of the tavern easing the aches of the long day.

"Still," he said after a moment, smiling a little, "beats the hell outta marchin' in the mud."

Thori raised her mug in mock salute. "To farmin' and fines, then."

"To farmin', fines... and fair company," Rugnar said, clinking his mug against hers once again.

The city bustled on outside, but for now, in that warm little corner of the Cask and Toad, Rugnar felt that all was well enough in the world.

The morning broke cool and cloudy, the perfect day for a bit of sharp business. Rugnar and Thori left the Cask and Toad early, walking through the market ward where smiths banged away in their forges and merchants hawked goods loudly to passersby. The clang of hammer on steel rang clear in the morning air, and the smell of burnt metal hung heavy.

They found a stout dwarven armorsmith, his forge tucked into a corner under a heavy slate awning. Suits of mail hung proudly on iron racks, glinting dully in the half-light. Rugnar stomped up to the man, a no-nonsense look on his face.

"I'm lookin' for chain mail," Rugnar said gruffly. "Strong stuff. None o' that patchwork rubbish."

The smith, a square-faced dwarf with blackened fingers and a beard tied in iron rings, sized Rugnar up with a shrewd eye.

"Got a few sets. Best work this side of the Spine Hills," he said, patting a heavy suit draped over a wooden stand. "Ninety gold."

Rugnar snorted loudly. "Ninety? For links that look hammered by a blind goblin? Seventy and I'll take it off your hands now."

The smith scowled, but Thori leaned in, crossing her arms.

"Seventy's more than fair," she added. "And you'll not find another buyer before the day's done."

After a bit of back and forth, and much muttered dwarven curses, they settled on seventy-five gold. Rugnar handed over the coin and slung the heavy mail shirt over his shoulder, feeling the solid weight of it.

"Good," Rugnar grunted. "Now, a proper hammer to go with it."

Next door, the weaponsmith had a line of fine weapons on display. Rugnar picked up a warhammer with a head of dense iron and a thick oaken shaft, feeling the balance.

"Fifteen gold," the smith said without looking up from sharpening a sword.

Rugnar laughed roughly. "Ten, and I'll even tell folk where I got it."

The smith glanced up, saw Rugnar's bulk and the gleam of coin at his belt, and nodded once.

"Ten it is. Take it and swing true."

Rugnar paid, slinging the hammer onto his back, the weight of the new gear making him feel almost young again.

They strolled back to the Cask and Toad, Rugnar kicking dust with every step, feeling like a man in his proper skin. Inside, they ordered mugs of ale. Rugnar downed his in one roaring pull, slamming the mug down and croaking like a beast, drawing a few startled looks from the other patrons.

"Ye'll scare the bark off trees with that noise," Thori said, laughing hard.

His vision swam pleasantly as he leaned against her, chuckling deep in his chest. They paid for another night's stay without argument, wanting one last night in a proper bed before the road called them home.

That night, under the thick wool blankets in the small wooden room above the tavern, Rugnar and Thori found each other again. No words were needed. Their kisses were rough and hungry at first, the strength of hard lives pressing into every touch. Later, the storm of it softened into something slower, something easier, and they drifted to sleep tangled together, the world beyond the walls forgotten.

Before returning to Hollowbarn, they made use of the bath service offered by the inn. The steaming tubs of hot water washed away the road dust and the sharp sweat of their labors. Rugnar dunked himself fully under, emerging with a loud snort.

"By Moradin's beard, I needed that," he muttered, scrubbing at his thick hair.

Thori laughed and splashed water at him. "You look less like a boar now. Almost like a man."

They dressed in clean clothes and returned to the markets, this time moving slowly, carefully observing the prices shouted by other merchants. They studied the costs of ale, flour, hides, vegetables, and simple goods.

"Barley's up," Thori noted, eyeing a thin old man shouting over his sacks. "Good for us."

"Ale's down a touch," Rugnar said. "Too many brewers bringin' watered-down swill."

They took mental notes, planning to adjust their own prices to undercut the city folk without giving away their goods for nothing.

Before heading back, Rugnar spotted a stall lined with plain but sturdy dresses. He stopped, eying a simple green woolen one with good stitching.

"Try this," he said, tossing five gold at the vendor and holding the dress out to Thori. "Something proper for the farm. Can't always go swingin' hammers in iron boots."

Thori blinked, surprised, then grinned wide. "You soft old goat."

She tugged on his beard lightly before walking off to find a return favor. At a cobbler's stall nearby, she bought a pair of thick, sturdy boots—wide enough for Rugnar's heavy feet—and handed them to him with a wink.

"For the fields. Can't have you stompin' about in cracked boots."

They laughed and loaded their new goods onto the wagon. Before leaving, they stopped by a toolseller and bought a new rake, two scythes for cutting hay, a mallet for fence repair, and a handcart to carry firewood and stones.

"We'll have that farm whipped into shape before winter," Rugnar said, swinging up into the wagon seat.

"Aye," Thori agreed, settling beside him. "And maybe ourselves along with it."

Blood and Stone

The wagon creaked into Hollowbarn just as the sun dipped low behind the hills, throwing the fields into long, cool shadows. Rugnar and Thori looked out over their home—the golden fields, the smoke rising from the chimneys, the villagers moving about their evening chores—and for a moment, all was as it should be.

But the peace didn't last.

As they pulled up to Rugnar's cottage, they saw a cluster of worried faces gathering near the old village green under the sprawling ash tree. Elder Arvel, stooped but still sharp-eyed, waved them over urgently.

They climbed down from the wagon, exchanging a glance. Trouble was thick in the air, heavier than smoke.

"Rugnar, Thori," Arvel said without preamble. His voice was low but hard as stone. "A few chickens are gone. Then went pigs. Then..." He paused, his face grim. "Young Berwin came staggering back from the woods yesterday. Covered in blood, babblin' about things crawlin' outta the old stones. Blades for claws, he said."

The gathered villagers shifted uneasily, whispering among themselves.

Arvel stabbed the ground with his cane. "We need ye to track these beasts to their lair and put an end to it. No talking, no parley. Hollowbarn stands, or Hollowbarn falls. It's as simple as that."

Rugnar squared his shoulders, exchanging a brief nod with Thori. They both knew what needed to be done.

"You have our word," Rugnar said, voice steady. "We'll see it finished."

Thori tightened the strap on her warhammer. "No beast or brigand's gonna drive us from our homes."

The villagers murmured approval, their trust laid heavy in the air like a shield around Rugnar and Thori.

They spent that night sharpening blades, checking armor, and packing for the hunt—thick cloaks, dried meats, rope, lanterns, and oil. Under the light of the swollen harvest moon, they rested only briefly, rising before dawn broke cold and gray over the village.

The road into the High Forest was little more than a narrow trail, overgrown and half-forgotten. The trees loomed tall and ancient, their thick canopies blotting out much of the sky. Every shadow seemed deeper, every rustle in the underbrush a whisper of unseen dangers.

Tracking wasn't hard. They found broken branches, muddy prints with strange claw marks, and blood smears where wounded livestock had been dragged away. They moved quietly, weapons ready, deeper and deeper into the thickening woods.

Hours passed. Then, near a fallen oak whose twisted trunk split open like a broken ribcage, they found them.

Six massive worgs, black-furred and slavering, crouched in the clearing. Their yellow eyes gleamed in the half-light, and when they saw Rugnar and Thori, they rose with low, rumbling growls.

"Stay close," Rugnar hissed, raising his warhammer. "Hit fast, hit hard."

The worgs charged.

The first worg lunged at Rugnar, who sidestepped with surprising speed, swinging his hammer in a brutal arc that cracked the beast across the jaw, sending it sprawling. A second worg tried to circle around, but Thori was faster, bringing her own hammer down on its spine with a wet crunch.

Another worg leapt at Thori, sinking its teeth into her bracer and dragging her off-balance. She roared, twisting and smashing her hammer into the beast's skull, the blow knocking it limp.

Rugnar, meanwhile, faced two at once. One snapped at his legs while the other lunged for his throat. He swung low, catching the first beast in the ribs, then braced his warhammer with both hands and drove it up under the second's chin as it leapt, breaking its jaw and knocking it back into the dirt.

Thori was knocked down by a sudden charge, the last two worgs piling onto her. She kicked one aside with a curse, but the other loomed over her, snarling.

Rugnar roared like a wild bull, charging across the clearing. He brought his hammer down with a mighty crash onto the attacking worg's back, feeling the sickening crunch of bone beneath the blow.

Blood splattered the grass. The last worg, seeing its pack broken and bleeding, turned tail and fled into the woods, yelping with terror.

Breathing hard, Rugnar leaned on his hammer.

"You alright?" he called out, wiping blood from his brow.

Thori staggered to her feet, her armor torn and bleeding from a shallow bite on her thigh, but grinning like a madwoman.

"Nothing worse than a day's work muckin' out the pig pens," she said.

They bandaged each other quickly, using strips torn from spare cloth, their hands moving steady despite the pain. The trust between them was unspoken, built from hardship and iron will.

"Come on," Rugnar said, shouldering his hammer. "This was just the beginning. The real filth’s deeper in."

They shared a look, a nod, and pressed onward into the dark heart of the High Forest, ready to face whatever blood and stone the world would throw at them next.

Two days into the heart of the High Forest, the endless green pressed on their minds like a weight. Their clothes clung damp to their backs from mist and sweat. The trees towered close, their trunks wrapped thick in moss, the ground a soft, sucking mud that swallowed their footsteps. The deeper they went, the quieter the world became, until even the crows fell silent.

It was on the second afternoon, just as the light was failing again, that a wounded stag stumbled into their path. Its flank was torn open, red with blood, and it moved with staggering steps, the whites of its eyes flashing with pain. It paused not five paces from them, nostrils flaring, trembling.

Rugnar shifted his grip on his hammer, stepping forward.

"One blow, and it won't suffer no more," he muttered, voice low and rough.

Thori caught his arm gently.

"Let it go," she said. "It’s fought enough battles for one life."

Rugnar looked at her a moment, the hammer heavy in his hand. Then he grunted, stepping back. The stag looked at them both, wild-eyed, and then limped away into the thick underbrush, vanishing like a ghost.

"Hope the world’s kinder to it than it’s been so far," Thori said, adjusting her gear.

Rugnar just grunted again, and they moved on.

Later that evening, as the last of the sun bled red through the trees, they found it: a sunken stairway, almost swallowed by time. Thick vines and heavy moss clung to the stone, but the outlines were unmistakable. The steps, carved with old dwarven craft, sank into darkness below. Claw marks gouged the stone, and greasy black stains smeared the broken carvings.

Rugnar ran a calloused hand over a cracked pillar.

"Dwarven make," he said. "Old... older than the wars I fought."

"Older than any living memory," Thori agreed, unslinging her warhammer and lantern.

The smell of rot drifted up from the blackness below. The stairs seemed to drink the light from the setting sun, promising only cold and silence.

They descended carefully, boots clinking softly on wet stone. The air grew colder, the faint sounds of dripping water echoing from unseen depths.

The stairs opened into a wide hall, once a proud guard-post now shattered and ruined. Broken statues of dwarf warriors lined the walls, their faces worn away by time and violence. Here and there, shields lay broken on the floor, rusted weapons scattered like bones after a feast.

They moved slowly, scanning every shadow. And then—movement.

From behind a fallen pillar, blind faces and sharp ears turned toward them. Ten grimlocks, subterranean humanoids, their skin like pale stone and their bodies twisted and brutish, crept toward them. Though sightless, they moved with a frightening, unnatural grace, sniffing the air, stone blades gripped tightly in their gnarled hands.

"They're setting up an ambush," Thori hissed, raising her hammer.

Rugnar squared his shoulders, gripping his weapon tightly. "Better to hit 'em before they get their feet under 'em."

"No," Thori whispered sharply. "Wait. Circle them, hit from behind. Pick 'em off."

Rugnar shook his head, voice rising in a low growl. "A strong charge scatters rats quicker than tiptoein' around like a bard in a ball gown."

Thori glared at him, her knuckles whitening on her weapon.

"Brute strength gets you killed in tunnels," she snapped. "We do this smart."

They stood for a heartbeat longer, the grimlocks creeping closer in the dark. Rugnar’s teeth ground together, but he nodded grudgingly.

"Fine. Yer way. But if we end up dead, I’m blamin’ your caution."

With a brief, grim smile, Thori motioned him to follow as they flanked the lurking creatures.

Moving in the shadows of broken statues and fallen stones, they took the grimlocks by surprise. Their ambush turned against them, the blind creatures squealing in confusion as Rugnar and Thori struck hard and fast. Hammer met flesh with brutal force, and stone blades clattered uselessly to the floor.

The fight was bloody but swift. Grimlocks fell one after another, their bodies thudding onto the cold, wet stone.

After the last one twitched and stilled, Rugnar wiped his hammer on a scrap of ruined cloth.

"Your way worked," he muttered. "Still don’t like sneakin'."

Thori smirked, blood streaking her cheek. "Stick with me, Rugnar. Might keep that thick skull o' yours intact."

They searched the fallen grimlocks and the ruined guard-post. Among the broken shields and rusted axes, they found a few pouches scattered in the muck—each containing small, battered coins. Rugnar emptied the bags into his palm and whistled low.

"Twenty... thirty... about fourty gold."

They also found carvings along the walls, faint dwarven runes mostly worn away by time. Thori knelt, tracing them with a gloved hand.

"'Beware the Hunger Below,'" she translated aloud.

They exchanged a look, the chill of the place sinking deeper into their bones.

"This was just the doorstep," Rugnar said grimly. "Whatever's deeper... it’s worse."

Shouldering their weapons, the two of them pressed deeper into the broken catacombs, where only darkness and old oaths long broken awaited.

The descent into the catacombs grew more treacherous. Cold, wet air seeped from the walls, and the narrow passageways twisted like the roots of some giant, long-dead tree. Rugnar and Thori moved carefully, weapons ready, lantern held high to pierce the clinging darkness.

The stone underfoot changed subtly, the ancient carvings giving way to rough, gouged rock. They had reached the Den of Claw and Hunger.

The stench hit them first, a foul mixture of decay, rot, and something sweet and sickly. The narrow halls were clogged with thick, sticky webs, draped like curtains from floor to ceiling. Rugnar cursed as his boot caught in one strand, tugging free with a loud ripping sound.

"Ettercaps," Thori muttered grimly, her warhammer gripped tight. "Spider-folk. Not natural."

From the darkness ahead, movement stirred. A low, chittering hiss echoed off the stone. Then, crawling from the shadows, the enemy revealed itself: twisted, spider-like creatures walking hunched on long, clawed limbs—four Ettercaps, their fangs glistening. Around them skittered a dozen giant spiders, their thick legs clicking against the rock.

"We burn the webs," Rugnar growled, pulling a flask of oil from his pack.

Thori nodded sharply. "Clear the choke points or we’ll die before we draw steel."

Rugnar splashed the oil across the webs blocking the hall and tossed a lit torch into the mess. The flames roared to life, black smoke billowing, driving back the creeping wall of silk. The Ettercaps screeched, scuttling toward them with shocking speed.

The first wave came fast—two giant spiders leaping over the burning web. Rugnar swung his hammer with a bellow, smashing one against the wall in a shower of ichor, while Thori crushed the second under a heavy downswing.

More came behind them. Poisonous fangs flashed in the firelight. Thori staggered back, a spider biting deep into her calf before she crushed its head with a wild strike.

A coil of web shot from the darkness, wrapping Rugnar's arm and yanking him toward the ceiling where an Ettercap lurked. He roared and tried to pull free, but the webbing held firm, dragging him toward sharp, waiting claws.

"Rugnar!" Thori shouted.

Without thinking, she dove forward, cleaving through the web line with a desperate swing of her warhammer. The force of it threw her off balance, and another spider lunged, sinking its

fangs into her side. She cried out, blood welling through her armor, but stayed on her feet, hammer raised.

Rugnar dropped heavily to the floor, rolling free and smashing an approaching spider flat with a sweep of his warhammer.

"Thori!" he barked, seeing the blood.

But she waved him off with a grimace. "Fight first, bleed later!"

They fought back to back, moving with a brutal rhythm. Rugnar crushed another Ettercap under a blow that cracked its spindly frame. A spider dropped from the ceiling, webbing trailing behind it, aiming straight for Thori. She didn't see it—too busy hammering a thrashing spider at her feet.

Rugnar saw it, moved without thinking. He threw his weight into the leap, swinging his hammer upward into the spider midair. The creature shrieked, torn apart before it could sink its fangs into Thori's neck.

"That makes us even!" Rugnar bellowed, blood running down his face.

"Only if we get out alive!" Thori shouted back.

They pushed forward, clearing the waves of spiders and ettercaps with fire, iron, and sheer stubborn fury. When the last creature lay twitching on the stone, they stood breathing hard, leaning on each other and drank some healing potion.

Around them, the ruined corridors smoldered with patches of flame, the smell of burning silk heavy in the air. Slick trails of spider blood glistened in the guttering lantern light.

Beyond the last web-choked passage, they found the descent into the lowest level—a great stair broken and crumbled, leading into vast blackness.

The walls down here were different—old stone shaped with reverence now marred and broken. Shattered dwarven shields lay scattered like fallen leaves, ancient skeletons with rusted armor leaning against crumbled pillars. At the center of the ruined shrine sat a great, cracked stone throne, once majestic, now defiled.

Something moved in the gloom beyond it. A deep, heavy breathing.

Upon the throne of the Broken One, a massive troll crouched. Its skin was mottled and gnarled with chunks of stone jutting from its back and shoulders like crude armor. Its yellow eyes glowed faintly in the dark, its claws as long as daggers tapping against the stone.

But the troll had not yet stirred fully, and Rugnar and Thori crouched at the shattered entrance, battered but alive, gathering their strength for the coming storm.

They exchanged a look, wordless but full of understanding.

This was what they had come for. Blood, stone, and the proving of their steel.

The troll shifted on its broken throne, thick lips peeling back to reveal yellowed fangs as its heavy body rumbled forward. Rugnar and Thori readied themselves, bracing against the heavy stink of rot and wet stone.

The beast roared, a sound that shook dust from the cracked ceiling, and lunged.

Rugnar was the first to meet it, warhammer swinging in a wide arc. His blow connected with the troll's knee, forcing it to stagger, but not fall. Thori circled quickly, aiming a crushing strike to the beast's side. The troll howled and lashed out with a clawed hand, catching Rugnar across the chest and hurling him against a broken column.

"Rugnar!" Thori shouted, dodging a swipe meant to crush her skull.

"I'm alive!" Rugnar growled, staggering to his feet, blood slick on his armor.

They regrouped, weaving and striking in tandem, forcing the troll to turn again and again, unable to focus on just one target. Rugnar struck low, battering the troll's legs while Thori hammered its arms and chest, keeping it from regaining balance.

Finally, with a bellow of pure fury, Rugnar landed a blow to the troll’s thick skull. The beast toppled backward, crashing down amid the ruins, the sound echoing through the broken catacombs.

Breathing heavily, Rugnar wiped blood from his brow.

"Burn it!" Thori shouted, already pulling a flask of oil from her pack.

They poured the oil over the twitching corpse. Rugnar struck flint to steel, and fire caught with a hungry whoosh. The troll’s flesh bubbled and blackened, its unnatural regeneration cut short by the roaring flames.

They stood in silence, watching until nothing but a smoldering carcass remained.

Amid the troll’s hoarded trash and bones, they found a heavy iron chest, half-buried under broken shields and old bones. Inside, gleaming faintly even in the low light, was a pile of gold coins — five hundred in all.

Rugnar whistled low. "Not bad for a day's slaughter."

They split the gold evenly, two hundred and fifty apiece, the clink of heavy coins a small reward for the blood they had shed.

Still aching, still bleeding, they each uncorked a healing potion and downed it. The familiar warmth spread through their limbs, closing wounds and easing bruised bones. It wasn't enough to erase the hurt, but it was enough to move on.

Shouldering their packs, they climbed back through the ruined catacombs, through corridors now silent but forever marked by their passing. The journey back to Hollowbarn was slow, their steps heavy but their hearts light.

When they reached the village green, the sun was just beginning to rise, painting the fields in gold. Villagers spilled from their homes, drawn by the sound of their approach. Cries of joy and relief filled the air.

"They're back!" someone shouted.

Cheers rose up as the battered pair crossed into the village square. Elder Arvel hobbled forward, his old face breaking into a wide, proud smile.

"You did it," he said simply.

Rugnar and Thori clasped each other's arms tightly in the old dwarven fashion, their grip strong despite the aches that still lingered. No words needed saying. What they had done, what they had survived, was written in the blood on their armor and the steadiness in their eyes.

The fields of Hollowbarn stretched green and full around them. The village was safe. For now.

They shared a brief smile, one of those rare, true ones that needed no boasting nor false laughter.

Built not from promises, not from oaths spoken in haste, but from the hard work of blood, sweat, and stone, their bond was now something real and lasting.

And tomorrow, there would be fields to plow, fences to mend, and a life to live—side by side.

Whispers Beneath the Boughs

The summer heat lingered late into the season, heavy and unmoving. Hollowbarn sweltered beneath a sky too bright and air too still. The forge fires burned low, and the usual ringing of Gerf's hammer had not been heard since the morning prior.

Rugnar found him slumped against the anvil, skin ashen and sweat pouring from his brow. His great arms, once thick and corded with muscle, now trembled weakly. When Rugnar knelt beside him, he saw the dark boils blooming along Gerf's neck and chest, skin stretched taut around them, oozing with a foul blackness.

"Gerf," Rugnar muttered, grasping his shoulder. "Speak, lad."

Gerf groaned, lips cracked and voice no stronger than a breeze. "It burns… gods, Rugnar, it burns like the forge gone mad…"

Rugnar lifted him with effort, carrying him back to his cottage. The village healers came—old Brenwyn with her willow bark and lavender water, the soft-spoken Elric with his poultices and salves—but nothing brought down the fever. Gerf only worsened, sinking deeper into fevered muttering and twitching fits.

Thori arrived from the fields, dirt on her hands and worry deep in her brow.

"How bad?" she asked, standing beside Rugnar as he sat on the bench outside Gerf's house.

"Bad," Rugnar said, voice low. "He ain't fought this long to lose to a boil, but whatever's in him—it ain't common."

That evening, Mara the herb-woman came walking softly through the village paths, her eyes sharp with knowing. She came not to the door, but to Rugnar and Thori beneath the eaves.

"I've seen this before," she said, her voice little more than wind rustling dried leaves. "Long ago, when I was young. It's forest-sickness. From places where the roots twist deeper than they should, where the trees whisper old things. This ain't something poultices can cure."

Rugnar stood. "You know what will?"

Mara hesitated, her hands trembling slightly. "There's one who might. But none seek her unless they're desperate."

“Who?” Thori asked, her jaw tight.

“Hag Miri,” Mara whispered. “Lives in the black heart of the High Forest. They say she was old when the Dwarves first cut stone. Some call her crone, some witch. She’s got cures... but her cures come with prices.”

Rugnar didn’t hesitate. He straightened and spat into the dust. “If there’s breath left in Gerf, then I’ll not stand idle. You point us the way.”

Thori nodded once. “He built half this village with those hands. If he falls, a part of Hollowbarn goes with him.”

Mara pulled a scrap of rough-drawn parchment from her belt. “Follow the ghost-path near the drowned alder. Walk until the birds stop singing. When the trees start whispering your name, you’re close.”

Rugnar took the map and tucked it into his belt.

Thori looked him in the eye. “You ready for this?”

He tightened his grip on the haft of his warhammer. “Aye. For Gerf, I’d walk into the pit and back.”

The air around them thickened with the first hint of dusk, and in the stillness of the fields, Hollowbarn waited—its fires dimmer, its people hushed.

Rugnar and Thori turned toward the forest line once more, bound by purpose and shadow, ready to face the darkness beneath the boughs.

The sun had barely lifted when Rugnar and Thori passed beyond the edge of Hollowbarn’s furthest field, stepping into the wild border of the High Forest once again. This time, the forest felt different—heavier. No longer just ancient trees and deep shade, but something aware, something watching.

The path was little more than a faint trail of pressed grass winding between dark-trunked oaks and ash. Moss covered every surface, thick and wet, clinging like a second skin to stone and root. Vines hung from twisted branches, and the underbrush rustled with unseen movements. A cool mist crept in early and did not lift, curling around their legs like tendrils, swallowing their footsteps.

Rugnar paused and listened. Not silence—but wrong silence. No wind. No birdsong.

“You feel that?” he muttered.

Thori nodded, scanning the dim woods. “Like the air’s holding its breath.”

The trees closed tighter as they pressed forward, branches scraping overhead, black against the pale light. From time to time they heard a cry—a bird, but not one either of them could name. Long, high, like something screaming from far off. Once or twice, Rugnar spotted

shapes in the corner of his eye: the silhouette of a figure standing still between trees, or a child’s laugh, faint and echoing from nowhere.

“You see that?” he asked once, as a small figure darted across the path ahead.

Thori didn’t look. “No. And neither did you.”

Still, they walked on.

By noon, the woods were thick with the scent of rot and wet leaves. A fox slunk across the trail ahead, its coat mangy and patchy, but it only paused to watch them pass. Farther in, they saw a stag—not wounded this time, but still. It stood in the middle of a glade, unblinking, its eyes milky white. It didn’t move even as they passed within arm’s length.

“We’re not in the forest anymore,” Thori muttered. “We’re in her forest.”

They began seeing signs—strange ones. Bone totems hung from branches by braided twine. Crude dolls made from sticks and moss leaned against tree trunks, their faceless heads turning in the light breeze. One was shaped like a dwarf, with a tiny clay warhammer. Another bore an uncanny resemblance to Thori’s armor.

Rugnar reached for one, but Thori caught his wrist. “Don’t.”

He withdrew his hand slowly.

An hour later, they found a stone circle around a shallow pool where frogs croaked, but the water never rippled. Beyond that, a tree with its bark carved full of runes—dwarven, but twisted, the words stretched into unfamiliar shapes.

They followed the signs deeper, past fallen logs crawling with thick beetles, through stretches where the trees seemed to bend ever so slightly inward as if listening.

At one point, Rugnar stopped and squinted at the ground.

“Those prints ahead—they’re ours. From half an hour ago.”

Thori frowned. “She’s twisting the path.”

“Then we push straight. No more turns. Just forward.”

They stepped off the trail and into the unmarked brush, moving as one. Briars tore at their cloaks, damp earth clung to their boots, and the light faded fast even though it was still hours from dusk. And yet, somehow, ahead, they began to see a glow—dim orange light flickering through the trees like a low fire behind thick curtains.

They exchanged a glance and moved toward it, hearts steady, blades ready.

Whatever lay ahead, Hag Miri was waiting.

The faint, flickering orange glow led them at last to a clearing where the forest seemed to pull back in dread. In the center stood a crumbling shack, built of rotting timber and stone choked by tangled roots. Smoke curled from a blackened chimney, and the whole structure sagged into the earth like a wound never healed.

The air here was heavy and sour, thick with the smell of damp rot, old bones, and something sweeter, like rotten fruit left too long in the sun.

Rugnar tightened his grip on the strap of his warhammer as they stepped closer. Thori kept her weapon low but ready, her eyes narrowing at the shifting shadows around the shack.

"Feels like we’re knockin’ on death’s own door," Rugnar muttered.

Before either could call out, the door creaked open with a sound like a dying breath. From the darkness within shuffled a figure: bent and gnarled, wrapped in layers of filthy cloth. Her hair hung in matted ropes about her face, and her skin was the color of river sludge, tight over bones and twisted joints. Her eyes, though—sharp black beads—gleamed with cruel, vivid life.

She leaned heavily on a crooked staff carved with dozens of little faces, all grinning or weeping.

“Well now,” croaked Hag Miri, voice like dry leaves scraping stone. “Look what the woods have spat up for me. A pig with a hammer and a sow with a shield. Come seeking favors, do you?”

Rugnar planted his feet firmly, unwilling to be cowed. "We need a cure," he said gruffly. "For one of ours. Fever, black boils. No healer in Hollowbarn can touch it."

Miri cackled, the sound sharp and jarring. "Oh, yes, yes, I know it well. The Hunger’s Mark, it is. Grows in the flesh, eats from within. Left too long, it sprouts teeth. Lovely thing."

Thori stepped forward, voice steady but sharp. "Can you cure him?"

Miri’s head twisted sharply, her grin spreading too wide. "Of course I can. I know the old ways. The blood ways. I can pluck the sickness from his marrow like worms from rotted apples."

"And the price?" Rugnar asked, already wary.

"Price?" Miri sang, swinging her staff in slow circles. "Everything worth having comes with a price. I ask only... a little something. A memory. A secret. A taste of what you hold most dear."

Thori’s hand twitched toward her hammer. "Speak plain, crone."

Miri’s eyes flashed dangerously. "You want plain? Fine. One of you will give me a memory. A true one, precious and sweet. The kind that leaves a hole when it's gone. Or..." she leaned forward, breath foul and heavy, "you can give me something *alive.* Blood for blood."

Rugnar frowned deeply. "You want us to kill?"

"Not here," Miri rasped. "Bring me a living thing. A creature of the woods, pure and full of life. A fawn, perhaps. A white crow. A fresh, clean soul. Or pay with your hearts’ own treasures."

She stood there, waiting, smiling a toothless grin.

Thori glanced sideways at Rugnar, her face grim.

"She’s mad," Thori hissed under her breath.

"Mad or not," Rugnar said, voice low, "she’s our only hope for Gerf."

Miri chuckled and turned away, retreating into her hovel, the door swinging wide as if inviting them inside.

"Decide, little lambs," she called over her shoulder. "Choose, and choose well. The forest listens."

The clearing grew colder, the shadows longer, as Rugnar and Thori stood at the threshold of a choice heavier than any they had faced before.

Within the sagging walls of the hag’s hovel, the air was thick with smoke and the smell of boiling roots. Strange shapes hung from the rafters—dried wings, bird skulls, bundles of herbs too dark to name. A cauldron bubbled in the center, its contents sloshing thick and green.

Rugnar and Thori stood just within the threshold, refusing to sit despite Miri’s rasping insistence. The hag paced the uneven floor, her bare feet soundless against the damp boards.

“The cure you want lies in the roots of the whispervine,” she crooned, pointing a gnarled finger. “Pale stalks, black thorns, grows only in cursed soil beneath the old gallows tree. The ground there is foul, and beasts prowl it that even I don’t trouble.”

She turned to them, grinning wide, gums slick with blood. “But you’re strong, aren’t you? Brave. Perfect for such work.”

“Where?” Thori asked sharply.

“North of here, near the Drowned Druid’s ring. The grove stinks of iron and sorrow. You’ll know it when the ground feels like it wants to bite your boots.”

Rugnar narrowed his eyes. “And I’m guessing you don’t give away the location out of kindness.”

Miri chuckled darkly, spinning her staff. The carved faces along its crooked shaft seemed to twist, lips curled in silent screams.

“Oh, not kindness,” she said, her voice suddenly low and almost coaxing. “But I do have... pests. A nuisance. Big, loud, greedy thing, always sniffing near my roots. You destroy it for me—rip it apart limb from limb—and I give you what you need. Fair, isn't it?”

Thori’s eyes narrowed. “What kind of creature?”

“Something ugly,” Miri said, waving her hand. “Fur and tusks and meat for brains. You’ll know it when it finds you. It always does.”

As they considered the offer, Miri muttered something under her breath and flicked her fingers subtly toward Thori. Her voice slipped into an oily cadence as she said, “You trust me, don’t you, my sweet hammer-maiden?”

Thori blinked, a sudden softness entering her eyes. “I... I think she’s being fair.”

Rugnar shot her a look. “What? You hear her? She’s spinning riddles and half-truths. She—”

At that moment, Miri turned her black eyes to Rugnar, and with a low whisper and another twitch of her gnarled fingers, he felt something crawl beneath his skin. His vision warped slightly, her hunched frame seeming to stretch and loom larger.

The air turned cold. The room seemed to press inward. A voice, not his own, hissed in his mind: *Run. Run before she eats your bones.*

His knuckles whitened around the grip of his hammer, jaw clenched.

Thori shook her head, blinking rapidly as if waking from a dream.

The room grew still.

“Kill the beast,” Miri said, her tone suddenly serious, eyes gleaming like coal. “Bring back the whispervine roots. Then, and only then, will I give you the cure. Otherwise, let your blacksmith rot.”

Rugnar turned without a word, storming out into the mist. Thori followed, pausing only once at the threshold to look back.

“What is it you really want, Miri?” she asked.

The hag grinned, showing those red gums again. “I want what everyone wants, dear. A little pain. A little power. A little company.”

Outside, the forest seemed darker than before. The path ahead twisted through brambles and gnarled trees, leading deeper toward the grove—and whatever monster Hag Miri had loosed in their path.

The forest thickened into something less like trees and more like a maze of old bone. Vines hung low and tight as nooses, moss grew thick and spongy beneath their boots, and the air was choked with mist that tasted like iron and rot. Rugnar and Thori pressed forward in silence, the hush of the forest unnatural. Not even the crows called now. The branches above blocked out most of the sky, and the deeper they walked, the more the trees seemed to bend inward, their trunks warped, their bark slick with sap that gleamed red in the low light.

“This place reeks of old magic,” Thori muttered, pushing aside a curtain of hanging moss.

“It’s like the forest don’t want us here,” Rugnar growled. “Good. The feelin’s mutual.”

The grove revealed itself at last like a wound in the land—a low clearing sunk between twisted roots and weeping stones. At its center rose a dead tree, blackened and hollow, its limbs clawing upward like skeletal fingers. Beneath it, the cursed soil bubbled slightly in places, as though something unseen breathed beneath it.

Scattered among the roots were thorny, man-sized shapes—twisted masses of bark and root that stood like sentries, unmoving.

Then they moved.

Six Twig Blights stirred, emerging from the moss as if born from it, their jagged limbs creaking with each step. Their eyes glowed faintly green beneath thorny brows, and their clawed arms twitched hungrily.

Behind them, two larger figures crawled from the mist. They were Ettercaps, but twisted—far worse than the ones in the catacombs. Their bodies were bloated and glistening, covered in thorny growths and patches of bark. Their fangs dripped black ichor, and their many eyes rolled unnaturally in their sockets. Miri’s curse had made them something more—and less—than what they had been.

“Right,” Rugnar said, squaring his shoulders. “No time for prayers.”

The Twig Blights struck first. The creatures rushed in from all sides, their limbs moving with uncanny speed. One lashed at Rugnar, claws scraping across his chainmail, sparks flying. Another sprang at Thori, forcing her to duck beneath a whip-like branch that tore through the air with a sound like a cracking whip.

Thori smashed one of the blights flat with a two-handed swing of her warhammer, its splinters flying like dry tinder. Another clawed at her back, tearing through her cloak and leaving a shallow, burning cut along her ribs.

Rugnar took a blow to the thigh but spun into it, hammer arcing low and wide, sending a blight tumbling back into the undergrowth. Another pounced, wrapping him in vine-like arms. He roared, headbutting it, then crushed its twisted chest with a brutal downswing.

Then came the Ettercaps.

The first lunged from the mist, barbed legs slashing. Thori met it head-on, hammer clanging against its hard carapace, but the creature was fast. It darted left, then right, spitting a line of webbing that caught her arm and yanked her off balance. She staggered, barely managing to twist free before the creature's claws reached her face.

Rugnar charged the second, swinging with full force. The blow struck true, shattering part of the creature's shoulder, but it hissed and reared back, slashing across his chest, knocking him into the muck. It loomed over him, jaws wide—

Until Thori slammed into its side, driving it off with a warcry, her hammer a blur of metal.

They fought side by side then, surrounded by the groaning blights and the clicking, snarling Ettercaps. The plants joined the fight—roots lashing like whips, thorns bursting from the soil. Rugnar stomped down hard, breaking a crawling vine, while Thori dragged a blight backward into a patch of fireweed that burst into flame from a spark of her flint.

At last, only one blight and one twisted Ettercap remained. They circled like predators, but Rugnar and Thori stood back to back, bloodied but unbroken.

Rugnar baited the blight, taking a deep gash to the arm in exchange for one final blow that shattered its brittle spine.

Thori met the last Ettercap head-on. It lunged, webbing flying, but she ducked low and drove her hammer upward with a bellow, caving in its chest. It screeched, thrashed once, then collapsed in a heap of slime and splinters.

The grove fell still again. Smoke curled from burning vines. Blood and sap pooled in the mud.

Breathing hard, Rugnar leaned on his warhammer. "If that's her idea of a 'pest,' I'd hate to see what she calls a threat."

Thori wiped blood from her cheek, wincing. "Let's find the roots and get out before the trees themselves wake up."

Together, they approached the dead tree, where the whispervine bloomed—sickly white stalks with glistening black thorns growing in a perfect circle around the base.

Thori knelt, carefully digging around the roots with a dagger, wrapping the stalks in cloth.

As they turned to leave, Rugnar looked back once, eyes narrowed.

The mist clung heavier now, and the path back toward Miri's crumbling hut seemed longer than it had before. Every twisted branch, every slithering vine felt alive with watching eyes. Rugnar and Thori moved quickly, clutching the bundle of whispervine roots, grim and determined to finish their grim bargain and save Gerf.

The clearing where Miri's shack should have stood loomed ahead, the smoke from her crooked chimney still rising into the dead sky.

But something was wrong.

The mist shifted violently. The earth trembled, and from the roots of the forest itself, a monstrous shape rose. It stood as tall as a house, a thing of rotted wood, broken bones, and sinew twisted into grotesque knots. Skulls grinned from its tangled chest; its arms ended in splintered claws, and black ichor dripped from its joints.

It was no living creature. It was a Bone Golem, a twisted monument to death and decay, built from the forest's dead and given cruel life by foul magic.

Atop it, tangled in its shoulder vines, hung a totem of old bones—Miri's sigil.

"She knew," Thori growled, stepping back into a defensive stance. "She meant us to die here."

"Wanted strong bones for her spells," Rugnar spat, rage flaring. "Ours."

The Bone Golem moved with surprising speed, crashing through the clearing toward them, its massive limbs cleaving the air.

"Move!" Rugnar bellowed, dragging Thori to the side as a claw slammed down where they had stood, tearing a crater into the earth.

They rolled apart, coming up in fighting stances, but this wasn't like fighting the spiders or the ettercaps. The Golem's hide was near-impenetrable, gnarled wood and bone deflecting normal strikes. Rugnar's first blow rang off the creature's leg like a hammer against a church bell, leaving only a dent.

"This thing's too thick!" Thori shouted, dodging another swing that shattered a mossy boulder.

"Break its joints!" Rugnar roared back. "Cut the ropes that bind it!"

They adjusted their aim. Thori circled fast, driving her hammer into the creature's knee, seeking the seams where vine and bone twisted together. Rugnar ducked under a sweeping

arm and slammed his hammer into a knot of bones at its side, splintering it with a thunderous crack.

The Bone Golem staggered but swung wildly, catching Rugnar in the ribs and hurling him across the clearing. He hit the ground hard, groaning, blood filling his mouth.

Thori, seeing Rugnar down, roared and leapt for the thing’s legs, swinging with all the fury she had left. She shattered one of its knee joints, and the beast toppled sideways, crashing into the dirt.

"Now!" she cried.

Rugnar forced himself up, pain burning through his chest, and charged. Together, they battered the creature’s vulnerable points, hammering into exposed sinew and brittle, rotted wood. Each blow sent cracks through its frame. Still, it thrashed wildly, nearly ripping Thori's arm from her socket as she barely blocked a claw with her shield.

Thinking fast, Rugnar grabbed the flask of oil he had left, hurling it onto the Golem’s chest where the totem hung. Thori, seeing the plan, struck flint to steel and tossed the lit spark.

The flame caught instantly. The totem flared up, the fire racing along the woven vines, and the Bone Golem let out a soundless, shuddering cry. It stumbled back, its frame collapsing inward as the fire devoured the dark bindings that held it together.

Within moments, it was a heap of charred bones and smoldering branches.

Breathing heavily, bloodied and bruised, Rugnar stood over the ruin and spat.

"Rot in the dirt, hag's dog."

Thori limped to his side, gritting her teeth against the pain. "That's one trap we ain't dyin' in."

Behind them, the mist writhed and Miri's hovel seemed to shrink into the gloom, as though recoiling from their survival. The party drank healing potion and moved on.

"She'll know we lived," Thori said grimly.

"She'll regret it," Rugnar muttered, clutching the whispervine roots tight in one hand and his hammer tighter in the other.

The forest around them groaned and shifted, but they had won—for now.

Their path forward was clear: deliver the roots, save Gerf... and settle accounts with Miri soon enough.

The black mist curled at their heels as Rugnar and Thori limped back into the clearing where Miri's crooked shack stood like a spider crouched in its web. The hut hadn't moved, but something in its presence had changed. The air felt hungrier. The twisted roots that coiled around its frame looked more like grasping fingers than ever before.

Smoke still rose from the warped chimney, and the door creaked open before either of them knocked.

Miri stood in the threshold, hunched and grinning, her ragged cloak fluttering slightly in the still air.

"Well," she rasped, eyes gleaming. "Still walking. That was unexpected."

Rugnar stepped forward, blood crusted in the corner of his mouth. "You sent that beast to kill us."

Miri chuckled. "No, no, I *warned* you of pests. I never said they were loyal to me."

Thori's hand clenched around the haft of her warhammer. "Lies wrapped in riddles are still lies."

Miri waved her gnarled hand. "Oh, don't pout. You're alive, aren't you? Stronger for it. And look—" she gestured behind her, and a bundle of whispervine roots sat on a crooked table, more than what they'd gathered. "The full dose. Enough to cure your poor dying friend and a whole flock besides."

She stepped forward, her eyes sharp and cunning. "But. There's a price. Not bones, not blood —not today. No, I ask only that you *forgive* me, little lambs. That you see the value in pain and trust me enough to owe me... a favor."

Rugnar spat to the side, eyes never leaving her.

"You want us to bind ourselves to you after what you just pulled?"

Miri's smile never wavered. "Is trust not a currency like any other? You've proven strong, clever. I could use such... thoughtful souls."

Her voice slipped into that oily cadence again. Her eyes flashed dark. A subtle whisper echoed at the edge of their hearing.

Thori blinked and frowned. "She's trying it again."

"I feel it," Rugnar growled, bracing himself against the pressure curling behind his eyes, the warmth of unnatural suggestion slithering along his spine.

"Enough," he snarled, stepping forward. "You want us to play nice? You should've kept your pets on a leash. Now give us the roots and say nothing more, or I'll turn your hut into splinters and feed your teeth to the crows."

Thori joined him, her voice hard as cut stone. "No riddles. No bargains. You made a deal. We upheld our end. You break yours, we bury you right here in your own filth."

Miri's grin faltered. Just for a breath. The shadows around her seemed to hesitate. Her staff lowered an inch.

"Hmm," she said slowly. "Such grim faces. Very well."

She turned back inside, muttering to herself, and returned a moment later with the full bundle of whispervine wrapped in damp moss.

She held it out, her hand trembling slightly. "Take it. But remember, all strength fades, all debts return."

Rugnar snatched the bundle without a word.

Thori locked eyes with the crone one last time. "If we see you again, make sure it's from across a fire. Not beside it."

They turned and walked away, slowly, every muscle aching, every wound sore, but with the precious cure clutched tight in Rugnar's hand. Behind them, Miri's hut seemed to sigh—an exhale of old disappointment, or perhaps patience.

The forest closed in behind them. But they did not look back.

The air behind them grew quieter as Miri slunk into the shadows of her hovel, muttering and chuckling to herself like a storm receding over a dark sea. Just before the door creaked shut, she flung a small leather pouch into the dirt at Rugnar's feet. Inside, bundled in damp black moss, were the healing plants—more than they had gathered, their stalks thick, thorns gleaming with faint purple sap.

"There," her voice rasped from within, "may your bones ache loud when I come calling."

Then the door slammed, and her shack faded behind curtains of mist, swallowed like a half-remembered nightmare.

Rugnar picked up the pouch in silence, eyes hard.

They left that cursed grove with no more words. The forest gave no farewell, only shifting shadows and the whisper of dead leaves beneath their boots. Though the mists still played tricks at the edge of their vision—phantom figures in the trees, soft laughter where there should be none—they kept walking. Side by side, bruised, bloodied, but unbroken.

It was a long road back to Hollowbarn, and the journey wore on them. At dusk on the second day, they saw the smoke of home curling in the sky and smelled the rich, welcome scent of tilled earth and animal dung.

They found Gerf still breathing but barely. The boils had deepened, and his skin was waxen, his chest rising shallow and slow.

Mara met them in silence and said only, "You have it?"

Rugnar handed over the pouch.

That night, in Mara's cottage, the hearth burned bright as she brewed a thick draught from the whispervine—adding crushed root, ground bark, and a silver needle dipped in rainwater. Rugnar sat by Gerf's bed, holding his old friend's hand, while Thori stirred the cauldron, sweat running down her temples.

Gerf drank in weak gulps, and the potion's color changed from deep violet to gray-green as it touched his lips.

They watched through the long night as the fever broke. The blackness faded from his boils, and by dawn, he was sleeping peacefully, his breath slow and steady. Rugnar had not wept since he was a boy, but he leaned back then and exhaled like the weight of war had left his chest.

"He's not gone," Thori said quietly.

"No," Rugnar replied, staring into the embers. "But we've come close too often lately."

By midmorning, word spread across Hollowbarn. The forge rang again with hammer and steel. The villagers gathered near the square, offering gifts of bread, wool, and cider. Children laughed again in the fields.

Mara offered no thanks—only a nod. But the look in her eyes spoke volumes.

Rugnar and Thori stood by the fence at sunset, watching the sky bleed gold across their home.

"He's safe," she said.

"For now," Rugnar muttered. "But she'll call on us again. I saw it in her eyes."

"You scared her."

“She’s not the kind that forgets.”

They stood there a while longer, wind rustling the trees, the High Forest dark and silent beyond the horizon.

Hollowbarn was safe. Their fields would grow. The forge would ring.

But in the depths of the forest, in the knot of roots beneath that crumbling hovel, something remembered their names.

And one day, it would come calling. But not today. Today, they lived.

Shadows of Stone and Coin

The gates of Ironhelm rose before them in the midmorning sun, tall and stern, carved from mountain granite that gleamed faintly where ancient runes caught the light. The great trade city buzzed with life, carts clattering over cobbled streets, dwarves shouting prices for bolts of cloth and crates of iron goods, halflings darting between legs with bundles of fruit, and grizzled humans leaning on battered wagons filled with dried goods.

Rugnar and Thori made their way into the market district, their wagon laden with sacks of barley flour, jugs of dark ale, and neatly wrapped hides. They spent the better part of the day at a rented stand near the heart of the Trade Square, barking offers and haggling with every kind of buyer Ironhelm had to offer.

“15 gold for two sacks of best flour, and I’ll throw in a mug of ale!” Rugnar called, slapping the side of a flour bag with a heavy hand.

“Only a fool wouldn’t buy it!” Thori added, laughing as she handed a sealed jug to a halfling baker.

By sunset, their coin pouch was heavier by twenty-five gold. Not the richest day they’d ever had, but more than enough to call it good.

Tired and dusty from the trade, they decided against the fancy merchant taverns near the city square and turned their boots toward an old favorite—the Cask and Toad. It was a rough place by Ironhelm’s standards, favored by the working dwarves: stone masons, smiths, miners, and the occasional hard-living merchant. It suited Rugnar and Thori fine. The hearthfire roared, thick with the smell of meat and spilled ale, and the air buzzed with loud conversation and the occasional shout of laughter.

They shouldered their way in, but found the place so packed that every table was taken. Rugnar frowned, scanning the room.

“Well,” Thori said, jerking her chin toward a corner, “that table’s only half-filled.”

At the corner table sat a striking figure: an elven woman, tall and severe, her polished metal armor catching the firelight. A dragon-emblem shield leaned casually against her chair, and a spear rested at her side. Her hair was black and her eyes were a sharp, assessing dark green.

When she caught Rugnar and Thori looking, she gave a small nod, inviting them without a word.

With a shrug, Rugnar stomped over, pulling out a bench with a scrape of wood on stone. Thori followed, setting her mug down heavily.

The woman smiled thinly, her voice smooth but strong. "Good evening. You two look like you've seen a few fights. And by the looks of that coin pouch, you know how to win them too."

Rugnar chuckled and took a heavy swig of ale. "Fought plenty. Won most. Lost a few teeth."

Thori grinned. "Mostly his."

The elf chuckled softly, a sound like cold water over stone.

"Name's Elixa," she said, inclining her head. "Elixa of Kordain. And you are?"

"Rugnar," he said simply, thumping his chest. "This is Thori."

Elixa sipped her wine, eyes never quite leaving theirs. "Well met, Rugnar and Thori. Tell me... are you content selling sacks of flour and mugs of ale? Or are you still hungry for something more... challenging?"

The fire popped and crackled beside them, and for a moment the tavern's noise faded into a soft, expectant hush.

Rugnar leaned forward slightly, his battered hand curling around his mug.

"Depends," he said. "What kind of challenge you mean?"

Thori tilted her head, a small smirk playing at her lips. "And what's in it for us?"

Elixa's smile widened just slightly, a glint of something fierce in her eyes.

"Gold," she said. "Adventure. And a chance to carve your names a little deeper into the stone of this world."

Outside, the evening deepened into night, and the streets of Ironhelm stirred with unseen whispers.

The fire cast dancing shadows across the stone walls of the Cask and Toad as Elixa leaned in, her sharp blue eyes glinting with the promise of something dangerous and rewarding. Her black hair, tied back in a neat braid, shimmered in the firelight as she tapped one gloved finger lightly against the side of her mug.

“The truth is,” she said, voice low but clear, “I’m not here for drink or company. I’m here for work. And if you two have the steel I think you do, you might just be what I need.”

Rugnar grunted, crossing his arms. “Spit it out, then. We didn’t come to Ironhelm to get wrapped up in someone else’s trouble unless it pays.”

Elixa gave a ghost of a smile. “It pays. Well.”

She glanced around the room briefly, then continued, keeping her voice just above a whisper.

"There’s a noble house here, House Marcaster. Old blood, old money. They’re claiming the Stonehand Trade Guild—one of the largest in Ironhelm—stole from them. Valuable goods, artifacts, ledgers. They want the guild punished, stripped of influence."

Thori leaned forward, brow furrowed. "And the guild?"

Elixa’s smile turned thin and sharp. "The guild claims the nobles are lying. That they staged the theft, planting false evidence to ruin their rivals and grab control of the south market routes."

She reached into her cloak and pulled out a small scroll, rolling it open just enough for them to glimpse a sigil—a stone fist gripping a balance scale.

"I was hired quietly by the Stonehand Guildmaster. No banners, no city guard, no public accusations. If it came to light the guild employed mercenaries, it would only fuel the nobles' story. My task is simple: retrieve a ledger. A real one. Proof the guild’s hands are clean."

Rugnar scratched at his beard, thinking. "And where’s this ledger?"

Elixa’s mouth twitched. "Rumor says it’s still within Ironhelm. Maybe in a safehouse, maybe stashed inside one of the abandoned smithies in the lower quarter. Wherever it is, it's under guard. Hired blades. Not city watch, but rough men paid to keep nosy folk out."

Thori drummed her fingers on the table. "So you need extra hands."

Elixa nodded. "Not just hands. Fighters who know how to handle a scrap—and how to keep their mouths shut afterward."

Rugnar and Thori exchanged a brief glance. A simple look that said everything. Coin, yes. Danger, yes. But also a chance to stand for something. A guild wronged by corruption, or at least the chance to uncover the truth and make their mark a little deeper in Ironhelm.

Rugnar leaned forward, his voice steady. "We’re in."

Thori smirked. "Beats wrestling pigs and cutting hay."

Elixa’s smile returned, genuine this time. She raised her mug slightly.

"Good. Then drink deep tonight. Tomorrow we make plans. And tomorrow night—" her voice dropped into a near growl, "—we take back what’s been stolen."

They clinked their mugs together, sealing the beginning of another venture under the cracked beams and warm fires of the Cask and Toad, while beyond its thick stone walls, the city whispered secrets in the deepening night.

The morning after their agreement, the streets of Ironhelm bustled with the early stirrings of trade: the creak of wagons, the bellow of merchants setting up their stalls, and the thick smell of fresh bread and forge smoke hanging in the air. Rugnar, Thori, and Elixa wasted no time. They split up, weaving through the crowd, ears open for anything that could lead them to the ledger.

Their first stop was the taverns, still thick with the night's drinkers too tired or too drunk to move on. Rugnar bought a round at the Broken Tankard, a seedy place not far from the eastern gates. With a few coins slipped across a sticky bar, he loosened some tongues.

"Yeah," slurred an old dwarf with an eye like a cloudy marble. "Saw 'em last night... skinny elf with robes all silver and fancy, little halfling feller built like a keg, and a big green brute what looked like he could bend iron with his bare hands. They weren't here long—asked a few questions, threw a few threats... then they headed east."

Thori, meanwhile, slipped a handful of coppers to a gaggle of barefoot street urchins who played dice near the temple steps.

"Saw some folks sneakin' 'round the old coal warehouses," one little girl whispered, her grubby hands snatching the coins fast. "Real late. Real quiet."

Elixa had her own way of gathering information. She cornered a minor cloth merchant in the alley behind the textile market, pinning him with a cold stare and a few cutting questions. The poor man confessed quickly, spilling what he knew about strange dealings near the Market Quarter's abandoned warehouses.

By midday, the trio regrouped at a shaded courtyard near the central fountain.

"The rival party's definitely working for the nobles," Elixa confirmed, rolling a copper coin across her knuckles as she spoke. "And they were seen entering a closed warehouse last night. Number twenty-three, just past the tanner's row."

"Perfect place to stash something you don't want found," Thori said, cracking her knuckles.

"Aye," Rugnar grunted. "Sounds like we'll be needin' more than good intentions if we're knockin' on their door."

They spent the afternoon gathering supplies from the market. Rugnar picked up a heavier set of throwing axes and a fresh coil of stout rope. Thori found herself a battered iron shield to replace the one cracked in the cursed grove, and several small jars of thick oil in case fire became necessary. Elixa moved with cold precision through a weaponsmith's shop, having her spear honed to a razor edge and picking up a short dagger for close encounters.

In the narrow alley behind the smithy, they checked their gear one final time, the noises of Ironhelm muffled by the heavy stone around them.

"You ready for this?" Thori asked Rugnar, adjusting the straps of her new shield.

Rugnar tested the weight of his hammer, satisfaction settling into his bones. "Been ready since she mentioned the green brute."

Elixa checked the bindings on her spear and slipped her shield onto her back.

"We hit fast," she said. "No giving them time to hide the ledger. No mercy if they draw blades."

The plan was set.

As the sun dipped low over the iron-grey roofs of the city, casting long shadows through the narrow streets, the three of them set off toward the warehouse district—where steel and blood would soon decide the truth of coin and corruption.

Dusk settled over Ironhelm like a heavy cloak, the sky bleeding into deep purples and grey as Rugnar, Thori, and Elixa made their way down the narrow alleys of the Market Quarter. The air smelled of old wood, cold iron, and the faint tang of river mist. Number twenty-three stood at the end of a broken cobblestone lane: a squat, abandoned warehouse with boarded windows and heavy double doors chained tight with a thick iron lock.

They crouched behind a stack of broken crates across the street, the gloom hiding them from passersby.

"Doesn’t look like anyone’s posted outside," Thori whispered, eyeing the empty street.

"Wouldn’t need to," Rugnar muttered, tugging at his hammer strap. "A place like that, people look the other way even if they hear screams."

Elixa nodded, her black hair catching the last glimmer of light. "No guards. They’re expecting the doors to be enough."

"And if we knock?" Rugnar asked, cracking his knuckles.

"We lose surprise," Elixa answered.

Thori grinned. "Then we don’t knock."

They crossed the street quickly. Rugnar tested the chain and found it tight and well-forged. He signaled Thori to brace it with her shield, then lifted his warhammer with both hands and brought it down with a shuddering crash. The chain snapped with a sharp metallic cry that echoed down the street.

Without waiting for the dust to settle, they slipped inside, weapons ready.

The inside was a forest of shadows. Crates, barrels, and rotting scaffolding filled the space, and the stench of old dust and mold hung heavy. Lanterns swung from a few overhead beams, casting trembling pools of light.

And waiting for them, half-shrouded in the dark, stood the rival party.

The elf mage was tall and thin, his silver robes stained at the hem. He leaned lazily on a staff capped with a sickly green crystal. Beside him, the halfling warrior twirled a pair of short daggers in his hands, smirking. The half-orc brawler cracked his knuckles, his bulk like a stone wall blocking the far exit.

"You're too late," the elven mage said, voice smooth and cold. "The ledger's already gone."

"We're not here for riddles," Rugnar growled, stepping forward. "Hand it over and walk away breathing."

The halfling chuckled. "Funny talk from a pig with a hammer."

Elixa lifted her spear, the tip gleaming in the dim light. "This doesn't have to end in blood."

The elf's smile was slow and sharp. "Oh, I think it does."

Rugnar's hand tightened on his hammer. Thori shifted her stance, ready for the first move. The tension thickened like smoke.

The half-orc grunted, stepping forward, fists raised. "Last chance. Turn around, forget you saw anything."

Rugnar spat onto the floorboards. "We ain't turning. And we ain't forgettin'."

Steel flashed in the low light.

The warehouse exploded into violence.

The halfling darted forward, fast as a snake, aiming a dagger at Thori's throat. She caught it on her shield with a clang and countered with a brutal shield bash that sent him sprawling into a crate.

The elf raised his staff, hurling a blast of greenish magic toward Rugnar, who rolled aside, the spell smashing a stack of barrels into splinters.

Elixa moved like a coiled spring, her spear flashing in sharp, precise strikes. She engaged the half-orc, dodging a wild, crushing punch and driving her spear into his side. The brute bellowed in rage, backhanding her across the warehouse floor with a crack of bone and wood.

Rugnar roared and charged the elf, hammer swinging. The mage parried clumsily with his staff but was forced back with each bone-jarring strike.

Thori advanced on the halfling, the smaller warrior weaving and stabbing low, but Thori's shield and hammer battered him into retreat with relentless force.

In the dim light, among broken crates and spilled grain, the fight raged. Dust choked the air, steel clashed and sparks flew. It was brutal, messy, and without mercy.

This was not a duel for honor. This was survival.

And Rugnar and Thori, hardened by war, farm, and blood, fought with the fury of those who had lost too much already to lose again.

The warehouse shuddered with noise—grunts, the clash of weapons, the crack of splintering wood. Dust filled the air like smoke. Lanterns swung wildly from the beams overhead, throwing long, leaping shadows across the chaos below.

The elven mage lifted his staff high, his voice slipping into a high, keening chant. In an instant, phantom shapes flickered through the dark: twisted figures lunging from the corners, whispering things that had no place in the world. Rugnar's hammer faltered mid-swing as the illusions twisted his sight—half-thinking he saw Thori's bloodied corpse at his feet, reaching for him.

"Rugnar!" Thori shouted through the smoke, snapping him out of it. Her voice cut through the magic like a blade, grounding him.

At the same time, the halfling darted in and out like a biting fly, his daggers flashing toward Elixa. She fought with precision, her polished spear flickering in quick thrusts, but the halfling was fast—too fast to easily pin down. He slashed at her legs, nicking her armor, and darted back, laughing.

"Can't catch what you can't hit, shiny girl!" he taunted, flipping backwards over a crate.

Meanwhile, the half-orc charged straight for Rugnar, roaring like a wild beast. His fists were as heavy as warhammers, and when he slammed into Rugnar, it was like a wall of stone falling. Rugnar staggered back, boots skidding on the dusty floor.

"You ain't movin' me, lad," Rugnar growled through gritted teeth.

The half-orc swung a massive haymaker aimed at Rugnar's head, but Rugnar ducked low, driving his shoulder into the brute's gut and forcing him back with sheer, grinding strength. The two locked in a brutal grapple, muscles straining, the sound of cracking joints filling the air.

Across the warehouse, Thori broke through a pack of illusions with a furious charge. Her axe-work was clean, brutal, driving the mage back toward a cracked support pillar. She slashed through one of the flickering phantoms, spun, and threw her axe toward the mage, forcing him to duck—and revealing his true position.

"Now!" she barked.

Elixa sprang forward, her spear flashing like a silver snake. The blade sank into the mage's thigh, drawing a howl of pain. He staggered, clutching his leg, the staff clattering to the ground. The illusions around the room sputtered and died, the twisted shapes falling into mist.

The halfling, seeing his leader wounded, cursed and fled toward the broken windows at the rear, nimble as a squirrel.

Rugnar, locked with the half-orc, snarled and finally heaved the brute sideways into a pile of rotting crates. The wood exploded in a shower of splinters. Rugnar wasted no time, slamming his warhammer down onto the half-orc's chest with a sickening crunch. The brute lay still, wheezing and broken.

The remaining rival party—bloodied and beaten—had had enough. The halfling disappeared into the narrow alleys beyond the warehouse, dragging the limping elf mage with him. The half-orc groaned and stayed where he fell, defeated.

Breathing heavily, Rugnar rested his hammer on the ground, his chest heaving.

Thori wiped blood from her brow and turned to Elixa.

"You alright?"

Elixa nodded grimly, straightening with a wince. "Took a few cuts. Nothin' that won't heal."

Together, the three of them looked over the wreckage: splintered crates, shattered beams, blood darkening the dusty floor.

The warehouse was theirs now—and somewhere among the broken barrels and hidden niches, the ledger they sought still waited to be found.

But the night was not yet over.

The last echoes of battle faded into silence, broken only by the soft creak of the swinging lanterns and the distant mutter of the city beyond the warehouse walls. Rugnar wiped blood from his knuckles and moved among the shattered crates, his boots crunching splinters beneath him.

"Right," he said, voice low. "Time to find what we came for."

They fanned out, searching the cluttered space. Thori kicked open a few crates, revealing nothing but old wool and broken tools. Elixa, moving with calm efficiency, swept aside a loose tarp covering a pile of barrels.

It was Rugnar who finally found it. Near the far corner, behind a stack of rotted grain sacks, he noticed one crate sitting slightly off-kilter. Its marking read simply, "Grain Shipments – West Storage."

With a grunt, he pried it open, revealing a false bottom cleverly fitted to look like solid planks. Beneath it, wrapped in oilcloth and tied with a leather cord, lay a heavy ledger, its bindings too fine for ordinary merchant work.

"Got you," Rugnar muttered, hauling it out.

They regrouped quickly and left the ruined warehouse behind, slipping through Ironhelm's quieter alleys toward the Stonehand Guild's back hall. There, in a cramped office filled with dusty scrolls and half-empty bottles of ink, Elixa's contact waited—a thick-bearded dwarf with ink-stained fingers and a quick, sharp smile.

He accepted the ledger with wide eyes and gave a low whistle. "This'll clear the guild's name right proper. You've done us a service."

He counted out their reward swiftly: sixty gold pieces in sturdy iron-minted coins. They split it three ways without argument, clinking their shares into their own pouches, the weight of the gold satisfying after a night of blood and bruises.

Outside the guild hall, the city's lights twinkled under the dark sky. Without a word, the three of them made their way back toward the Cask and Toad, their boots heavy but their steps sure.

Inside, the tavern was as lively as ever—dwarves shouting over mugs, the fire roaring in the great hearth, the thick smell of roasted meat and ale saturating the air. They found a table this time, worn and scarred, near the hearth's warm glow.

They dropped into their chairs with groans of relief. Elixa set her dragon-emblazoned shield carefully against the table, and Rugnar, still catching his breath, eyed it with a curious smirk.

"That's a fine piece," Rugnar said, nodding toward the shield. "Dragon on it... you from some noble house, then?"

Elixa laughed, a rough, honest sound. "Noble? No. Found it in the High Forest, years ago. Half-rotted off a corpse tangled in vines. Whoever it belonged to had no more use for it."

Thori raised an eyebrow. "Took it, did you?"

"Better than letting it rust," Elixa said with a shrug, taking a long drink of her ale. "Now it's mine—and it's earned every scratch it carries."

They clinked their mugs together then, the sound sharp and clear above the tavern din.

"To fair fights and found fortunes," Thori toasted.

"To smashin' noble plots and spittin' in fate's eye," Rugnar added.

Elixa lifted her mug high, her smile fierce. "And to whatever comes next."

The fire crackled. The mugs clashed. The night wore on, and beneath the stone beams of the Cask and Toad, three warriors planned the next turn of their long, hard road, laughter and plotting drifting into the deep Ironhelm night.

Ashes Beneath the Peaks

The road leading out of Ironhelm wound like an old scar across the hills, the stone fading into dirt as the city's towers shrank behind them. Rugnar, Elixa, and Thori rode in silence, their wagon heavy with supplies and their minds heavier still. Hollowbarn called to them, but before they could see the familiar smoke of their village, news reached them like a bitter wind.

A frantic rider met them on the road, mud and fear streaking his face.

"Fields burnin' at Hollowbarn!" he gasped. "An elf, or what's left of one — he's twisted, scarred bad. Set fire to the crops, beat old Gerral near to death! Took off north into the mountains!"

Rugnar's grip tightened on the reins until the leather creaked. "Ourik," he muttered darkly. "I heard tales of him. Cast out years ago. Some said he went mad."

"Looks like he finally proved it," Thori said grimly, slamming her fist into her palm.

Elixa's face was hard as steel. "We ride."

They wasted no time, driving the mule hard until the forests gave way to rocky slopes. They abandoned the wagon at the last farmstead, packing only what they could carry. The goat paths twisted and crumbled beneath their boots, slick with cold rain that fell in endless sheets. The mountains loomed ahead, dark and jagged against a churning sky.

Each step up the narrow trails was a battle. Thori slipped once, her foot sliding on loose scree. She caught herself with a grunt, but her shin took a deep gash from the jagged rocks.

"Just a scratch," she growled when Rugnar reached to help.

Elixa stumbled on a hidden patch of moss, catching herself on a sharp outcrop that tore a strip from her cloak and left a shallow cut across her forearm. She ignored it, tying a strip of cloth tightly around the wound without breaking stride.

Even Rugnar, built as sturdy as the hills themselves, bruised a shoulder when a patch of shale gave way underfoot, sending him crashing into a boulder before he could regain balance.

The rain never stopped. It soaked through armor, chilled them to the bone, turned every step into a test of will. Still they pressed on, driven by duty and anger both.

On the fourth day, as evening bled into the cracks between mountains, they found the first sign. A scorched patch of earth near a cluster of twisted pines. Blackened logs formed the skeleton of an old campfire, and nearby, gnawed bones scattered among the ash.

Rugnar knelt, running a hand through the cold embers.

"Recent," he said, his voice low.

"Too recent," Thori added, pointing at tracks half-smeared by the rain.

The cleft in the mountains yawned before them, a jagged scar of black swallowing the last light of day. Rugnar, Elixa, and Thori stood at its threshold, the rain still whispering down from the grey sky, though here, beneath the overhang of ancient stone, they found a brief, bitter shelter.

They lit torches, the flames sputtering against the damp air. Light flickered along the slick walls, revealing moss hanging in thick curtains and water trickling in thin veins down the

rock. The ground beneath their boots squelched with rot and mud, the air thick with the stench of damp earth and something fouler — something that had been dead too long.

Rugnar adjusted the grip on his warhammer and stepped inside first, his torch casting long shadows that twisted and danced with every cautious step. Thori followed close behind, axe in hand, her shield slung across her back. Elixa brought up the rear, spear held low, her eyes sharp.

The deeper they ventured, the narrower the passage became, the walls pressing close. Stalactites loomed overhead like the teeth of some vast beast, and every sound — the drip of water, the shuffle of boots, the hiss of their breathing — echoed in endless layers.

Without warning, a flurry of movement erupted from the darkness.

Crude spears hurled from behind jagged stalagmites, one clattering harmlessly off Thori's shield, another grazing Elixa's shoulder. From the shadows scrambled a pack of Troglodytes —vile, reptilian humanoids, their scaly skin mottled in sickly greys and greens. Their wide mouths split in snarls, revealing broken teeth, and their stench—thick, cloying, gut-churning —struck like a physical blow.

"Ambush!" Rugnar roared, swinging his hammer in a wide arc that shattered the first Troglodyte's ribs with a sickening crunch.

The creatures shrieked in their primitive tongue, lunging forward with crude spears and chipped stone axes. Thori drove her axe into the gut of another, twisting hard and ripping the weapon free as it slumped to the floor.

Elixa fought with cold efficiency, her spear flashing in tight, sharp thrusts, skewering one reptilian beast through the throat before spinning to parry another's crude blade with the butt of her weapon.

But the Troglodytes fought like cornered rats, desperate and feral. One sank its jagged spear into Rugnar's thigh, the point scraping against his chainmail. He grunted in pain and smashed the creature flat with a downward blow that left blood and ichor splattered across the cave floor.

Another leapt onto Thori's back, clawing and biting. She staggered under its weight but rammed herself backward into the stone wall, crushing the thing with a sickening crack.

The fight was quick, savage, and brutal.

When the last Troglodyte lay twitching in the dirt, Rugnar leaned heavily on his hammer, blood running down his leg in slow, thick lines. Thori wiped her axe clean on a dead creature's rags, her breath coming in low, ragged bursts. Elixa bound her shoulder with a strip of cloth torn from a fallen foe's sash, her face pale but resolute.

The air grew colder the deeper they went, the stench of rot thickening until it coated the back of their throats.

Ahead, the passage sloped downward, disappearing into a blackness that no torch could seem to fully pierce.

Rugnar spat onto the stone and tightened his grip on his weapon.

"No turnin’ back now," he muttered.

"No," Elixa agreed, her voice like a blade drawn in the dark. "He’s down there. Waiting."

And so they pressed on, deeper into the bowels of the mountain, where fire, ruin, and an outcast's madness awaited.

The tunnels narrowed and twisted, swallowing Rugnar, Thori, and Elixa in a labyrinth of cold stone and damp air. Their torches hissed and guttered, the light barely pushing back the thick, clinging darkness. Every step sent echoes bouncing down unseen corridors, whispering back distorted and broken.

The ground grew more treacherous the deeper they went. Cracks split the floor, sharp rocks jutted up like broken teeth, and slick pools of unseen slime made footing perilous. They moved carefully, senses straining against the gloom.

Without warning, something dropped from the ceiling with a wet, sucking noise.

Long, slimy tentacles brushed across Rugnar’s helmet just as Thori shouted a warning. From above, two Carrion Crawlers slithered into the torchlight—horrible centipede-like creatures, pale and glistening, their dozens of legs skittering across the rock. Their foul-smelling tentacles lashed outward, seeking flesh to paralyze and feast upon.

One tentacle slapped across Thori’s shield, leaving a slick, numbing slime that hissed where it touched the metal. Another brushed Elixa’s side, and she staggered, the poison burning against her skin.

Rugnar roared, swinging his hammer into the crawler nearest him, the heavy head smashing through soft carapace with a wet crunch. Thori fought like a berserker, hacking at writhing limbs, her axe sending bits of segmented body flying.

Elixa thrust her spear through the mouth of the second crawler just as it tried to clamp down on her leg, twisting the weapon free in a spray of dark ichor.

The creatures shrieked and writhed, but the trio fought with brutal efficiency, finally hacking the monstrosities to stillness on the cold stone.

Breathing heavily, Elixa wiped the stinging slime from her armor, her skin pale from the close brush with paralysis.

"More o' these tunnels," Rugnar muttered grimly, glancing into the deeper dark ahead.

They pushed on.

Minutes turned into hours. The walls grew stranger—etched with deep claw marks, bloody smears, and strange mutterings carved in jagged ancient elvish script. The symbols pulsed faintly under their torchlight, giving off a subtle, maddening hum.

"Ourik’s been here," Elixa said, reading the marks aloud. "'Fire cleanses. Blood mends. Stone weeps for the lost.'"

Thori muttered a dwarven curse. "He’s deeper gone than we thought."

As they rounded a sharp bend, a large cavern opened before them—jagged rocks and spires of stone filling the space. Their torchlight caught something massive hunched among the outcroppings, disguised so well it looked like part of the cavern wall itself.

Then it moved.

A Roper, ancient and twisted, lunged from its hiding place. Long, thick strands shot from its body, whipping around Elixa's waist and dragging her screaming across the stones.

"Elixa!" Rugnar bellowed, charging forward.

Elixa struggled fiercely, hacking at the tendrils with her dagger, but the Roper's strength was monstrous. Another strand wrapped around her throat, squeezing tight, cutting off her breath as she fought with desperate, wild strikes.

Thori ran to flank the creature, slamming her shield into the Roper's base, trying to distract it. Rugnar closed the distance, ducking another lashing strand, and drove his warhammer into the creature's stony hide with a thunderous blow.

The Roper's body shuddered, and its tentacle loosened just enough for Elixa to tear free, gasping and bloodied. A deep gash marred her neck, crimson soaking the collar of her armor.

Rugnar smashed the creature again, and with a sickening crack, it slumped against the cavern wall, dead.

Elixa dropped to one knee, coughing hoarsely, pressing a trembling hand to her wounded throat. Rugnar was at her side in an instant, ripping cloth from his own cloak to wrap the wound tight.

"You're alright," he growled. "You stay with us, hear?"

Elixa nodded weakly, gripping his wrist with blood-slicked fingers.

They rested only long enough to catch their breath, then pushed on, wounded and worn.

Ahead, the tunnels dipped even lower, the walls closing in tighter. The air was colder now, filled with a low, almost inaudible hum—like a heartbeat pulsing deep within the stone.

Ourik was close. They could feel it in their bones.

The stair wound downward like the spine of some vast stone beast, carved ages ago and left to crumble. Cold air rolled upward from the depths, smelling of mold, blood, and old, stagnant water. Their torches sputtered against the thick damp, and every step echoed down into silence that seemed to swallow all sound.

Rugnar led, jaw clenched, his hammer crusted with black ichor. Elixa moved stiffly behind him, her throat still tightly bound, her spear held steady but her steps slowed by pain. Thori brought up the rear, her shield arm aching from deflecting too many blows, her axe slick with monster blood and torch grease.

"Smells like rot and something worse," Thori muttered.

"Means we're close," Rugnar grunted. "Mad things live near mad men."

Then something hit the stone beside them with a wet, bone-cracking *smash*. A fleshy cone-shaped mass, riddled with jagged teeth, lay twitching in the dust—seconds ago it had been clinging to the ceiling.

“Piercers!” Elixa shouted, barely raising her shield in time as another dropped from above, shattering against her metal guard in a burst of slime and bone.

Rugnar dove forward, pushing Thori clear just as a third creature slammed into the steps where she’d been standing, cracking the stone.

“We move—fast!” Rugnar roared. “Keep to the walls!”

They surged forward, dodging the writhing remains of the pierced beasts, pressing into a wide, low chamber beyond the stair’s end. The smell intensified, overwhelming. Muck covered the floor, thick with waste and rotting meat. Pools of stagnant water filled the corners, bubbling faintly.

At the far end of the chamber, something stirred in the filth.

A great mound of flesh shifted and rose, revealing a bloated, hideous body covered in pustules and patches of scaly flesh. Three thick tentacles writhed from its back, one tipped with a hooked claw, another ending in a jagged, biting maw. Its central eye blinked open, lidless and milky, and its wide, drooling mouth split into a grin.

“Otyugh,” Elixa hissed.

The beast bellowed and lurched forward, sloshing through its pit of waste, its tentacles flailing toward them.

Rugnar roared and met it head-on, hammer raised, but the creature was deceptively fast. A tentacle lashed across his chest, tearing his chainmail wide and flinging him back into the mud. He rose slowly, coughing blood.

Thori flanked it, swinging her axe into one of the beast’s limbs, severing it clean—only to be backhanded across the chamber by another tentacle. She hit the wall with a groan and slumped, dazed.

Elixa stabbed her spear deep into the creature’s side, black filth spurting onto her arms and armor, but the Otyugh twisted, biting down on her shoulder. She screamed, falling to one knee, her weapon jerking from her grasp.

Rugnar, battered and gasping, surged up from the muck with a howl. His hammer slammed into the beast’s side again and again, each strike driving it backward. "For Hollowbarn," he growled. "For every wound. For every drop of blood!"

The Otyugh reeled. Thori, pulling herself to her feet, threw her axe—one final, desperate throw. The blade sank into the thing’s open eye with a wet crunch.

It screamed, thrashing, knocking rubble from the ceiling before it finally collapsed, gurgling into its own bile.

The chamber was silent, save for their labored breathing.

Rugnar stood hunched, blood dripping from his brow, armor torn and stained, hands trembling.

Elixa pulled her spear free and leaned heavily on it, silent.

Thori limped to Rugnar's side. "You still standing?"

He nodded once. "Not dead yet."

They looked ahead—past the filth, past the broken floor—and saw it: an archway, ancient and runed, leading into a vast cavern lit by a deep red glow. The final threshold.

Ourik waited beyond.

The final chamber opened like a hollow, broken heart within the mountain, vast and empty but for the echoes of ancient battles long forgotten. Half-collapsed dwarven walls leaned like drunken sentries, the air thick with damp and the scent of old blood. Pillars, cracked and blackened by smoke, ringed a central dais where a battered iron chest sat, and behind it stood Ourik.

He was a wraith of a man—gaunt, wild-eyed, his skin stretched tight over bone and old scars. His right arm was bound in rotted cloth, ending in a jagged stump. His lone good eye gleamed with a feverish light as he watched them approach. Around him, the stones were marked by deep gouges and old blood, the signs of madness left to fester in the dark.

Rugnar, Elixa, and Thori stepped forward, their weapons low but ready.

"Ourik," Rugnar said, voice carrying through the hollow hall.

The elf flinched at his name. For a moment, it seemed as though he might collapse where he stood. Instead, he dropped heavily to one knee, head bowed, voice raw.

"I knew you would come," he whispered. "I dreamed it. Night after night... the faces of those I burned."

He looked up, revealing the broken wreck of what he once was.

"My kin betrayed me," he rasped. "Handed me over to the dark elves like chattel. I screamed in their pits until my name lost meaning. And when I clawed my way free, there was nothing left of me but fire and hate."

He pounded a fist weakly against the stone. "I came to Hollowbarn to remember what it was to be a man. Instead, I became the monster they made."

Silence hung heavy between them.

Rugnar tightened his grip on his hammer. "You had a choice."

Ourik’s face twisted—half agony, half madness. "Maybe once. But no longer."

Without warning, he rose to his feet with a sudden, desperate cry, pulling a jagged, blackened blade from behind the chest. His whole body shook with fury and despair.

"If I cannot find peace," he howled, "then I will find war!"

He charged.

Rugnar barely raised his hammer in time to block the downward arc of Ourik’s blade, sparks flying from the clash. Ourik moved with the wild, unpredictable speed of a cornered animal. His strikes were brutal and without fear, each blow forcing Rugnar back a step.

Thori lunged to the side, seeking an opening, but Ourik spun and slashed low, his broken arm swinging with terrifying strength. She caught the strike on her shield, feeling the impact rattle through her bones.

Elixa darted in with her spear, thrusting toward his exposed flank. Ourik twisted, the spear gouging a shallow line across his ribs, but he retaliated with a vicious kick that sent Elixa staggering back, blood pouring anew from her wounded throat.

"Stay down, Ourik!" Rugnar barked, parrying another wild slash. "It doesn't have to end like this!"

Ourik only screamed, voice raw with years of rage. "It ended long ago!"

The fight churned across the cracked stone. Ourik fought with desperation, unrelenting, a storm of blade and madness. Thori hammered at his guard with heavy swings, forcing him into a retreat. Elixa, regaining her balance, circled to cut off his escape.

In one final clash, Rugnar caught Ourik’s blade on the haft of his hammer and twisted hard, wrenching it from his grip. With a roar, Rugnar drove his hammer into Ourik’s chest, a bone-crunching blow that lifted the broken elf from his feet and hurled him across the dais.

Ourik hit the stone hard, coughing blood, his body too battered to rise again.

Breathing heavily, Rugnar crossed the distance. He stood over Ourik, hammer raised, but the elf only looked up at him with hollow, broken eyes.

"Do it," Ourik croaked. "End it."

For a heartbeat, Rugnar hesitated. Then, with grim mercy, he brought the hammer down.

It was swift. It was final.

Silence fell over the ruins.

They turned then to the battered iron chest. Rugnar pried it open, revealing the glint of gold—five hundred coins, heavy and worn, the last remnants of Ourik’s lost dreams and broken promises.

They gathered the treasure in silence. No cheers. No boasts. Only the soft clink of coins into pouches and the weary creak of armor as they stood.

Bloodied, battered, and heavier of heart, Rugnar, Elixa, and Thori turned from the ruined hall and made their slow way back toward Hollowbarn.

The mountain kept its dead. The living bore their scars.

Justice had been done—but justice had teeth, and it bit deep.

The road back to Hollowbarn was long and muddy, the wagon creaking under the weight of their battered gear and aching bones. But the sight of the village, smoke rising gently from chimneys, fields stretching golden under the late sun, brought a warmth to Rugnar's chest that no gold could match.

When they arrived, the villagers gave them a few tired cheers, but it was clear life had moved on in their absence—there was work to be done, and plenty of it.

No sooner had Rugnar hauled his pack inside than he stomped to his wooden chest, drew out a battered mug, and filled it to the brim with dark ale from a barrel that had sat cooling in the cellar for months.

Without ceremony, he tilted it back and drained it in one long, thunderous gulp. A second mug followed. Then a third. As he slammed the final empty mug onto the table, he let out a croaking belch that shook the dust from the rafters, his beard bristling and, if one looked close enough, his chest hair seeming to sprout an extra inch.

From the doorway, Elixa coughed violently, waving her hand in front of her face.

"By the gods," she choked, stepping back. "I think my lungs just shriveled!"

At that very moment, Rugnar, satisfied beyond measure, released a thunderous fart that rolled across the room like a low explosion. The smell hit Elixa full in the face.

She staggered, gagging, and thudded against the wall. "Mercy, Rugnar! That should be declared a weapon!"

Rugnar laughed so hard he nearly fell off his stool. Wiping his mouth on the back of his hand, he leaned back and grinned.

"Welcome home, Elixa."

Still coughing, she managed a weak smile. "I don't have a home anymore."

Rugnar scratched his beard thoughtfully. "Well, reckon we got space in the barn. Ebrias's got her hay bed there. You'll fit right in... but," he jabbed a thick finger at her, "you pull your weight. No freeloaders in Hollowbarn."

Elixa straightened, brushing the dust off her armor. "Fair enough."

"Good," Rugnar said, standing up and slapping her on the shoulder. "You're on muck duty."

"Muck duty?" she echoed suspiciously.

"You'll be cleanin' manure," Rugnar said with a grin, "scrubbin' the barn floors, feedin' the animals, and washin' 'em too if they look at you wrong."

Thori, already tossing her cloak onto a hook, snorted. "Better you than me, elf."

Rugnar turned to her next. "And you're not free either, missy. Those fields are lookin' like a weed garden. Get out there with a sickle and clean it up."

Thori groaned, dragging her axe with her. "I just killed monsters underground... now I'm battlin' dandelions."

"Welcome to farm life," Rugnar said, lighting his pipe with a grin. He settled himself comfortably on a chair outside, puffing thick clouds of smoke into the air while leisurely tying bunches of freshly cured pipeweed for sale at the market.

Meanwhile, the farm buzzed with life. Elixa, gritting her teeth, hauled heavy buckets of manure to the compost heap, scrubbed the barn floors until they gleamed, and carefully fed the pigs, sheep, and chickens. She cursed under her breath every time a chicken pecked her boots or a piglet tried to chew her cloak.

Inside the smithy, Gerf was a hammering fury. With a fire roaring in the forge, he slammed red-hot metal on his anvil with a rhythm that shook the windows. Sparks flew like wild stars. He was crafting new tools for the village, but more importantly, a short, brutal-looking sword for himself. His leather armor lay spread out on a worktable, patched and reinforced with fresh metal fittings.

"By Moradin's beard," Gerf muttered between hammer strokes, "let 'em try messin' with Hollowbarn again."

At the forest edge, Mara wandered barefoot through the undergrowth, filling her basket with riverbank flowers and fragrant herbs. She moved with the patience of the old ways, humming softly as she gathered. Later, she would bake fresh loaves of bread and craft pottery so fine and detailed that even the traders of Ironhelm prized them.

By late afternoon, Hollowbarn hummed with energy: smoke from the forge rising, laughter from the fields, the smell of baking bread wafting through the air, and the low rumble of contented livestock in their pens.

As the sun set, painting the sky in deep gold and violet, Rugnar took one last puff of his pipe, surveying his domain with a wide, satisfied grin.

"Not bad for a bunch of war-torn fools," he muttered, chuckling to himself.

And somewhere behind the barn, Elixa cursed as a stubborn goat bit her again, the sounds of life in Hollowbarn rolling on strong and true.

Ash and Brotherhood

The morning broke cold and gray over Hollowbarn, the mist clinging low to the fields like a second skin. Rugnar stood knee-deep in the half-frozen mud, his shoulders hunched against the chill as he swung his hoe into the stubborn earth. His breath misted before him, his body moving with the easy rhythm of a man who had known harder labors and survived worse mornings.

He heard the sound before he saw it — a low, dragging crunch of boots across gravel, too slow, too weary to be anything but trouble. Rugnar straightened, squinting across the frost-rimmed fields.

A figure stumbled into view.

The man was wrapped in a tattered cloak, one boot torn open at the side, his gait broken and limping. His face was hidden by the hood at first, but as he drew closer, Rugnar saw the long scars running down his face and exposed arms, the way he clutched his ribs as if holding himself together by sheer force of will.

Recognition hit Rugnar like a hammer to the chest.

"Urmir," he breathed.

The hoe dropped from Rugnar’s hands, forgotten in the mud. He strode forward, boots squelching, and caught the man just as Urmir collapsed forward. Rugnar’s strong arms wrapped around him, holding him up.

"By the gods," Rugnar muttered. "I thought you were dead."

Urmir rasped something unintelligible, his head rolling against Rugnar’s shoulder.

"Help!" Rugnar bellowed toward the village. "Mara! Get Mara!"

Thori and Elixa came running first, Thori with a half-full sack of feed still slung over one shoulder, Elixa dragging her muck-stained boots through the field. When they saw the condition of the man Rugnar cradled, they wasted no words.

Minutes later, Mara rushed from her cottage, a basket of herbs and cloths in hand. Her skirts whipped against her legs in the cold wind.

"Lay him down, quickly!" she barked.

They brought Urmir into Rugnar’s house, setting him gently before the fire. His cloak fell open, revealing a chest wasted thin by hunger, bruises blossoming across his ribs, old wounds half-healed and reopened by hard travel.

Mara worked swiftly, grinding herbs into a paste, binding his broken ribs with strips of clean linen soaked in healing poultice. She boiled a strong tea that smelled of bitterroot and pine,

forcing it between his cracked lips. His breathing steadied slightly, the color slowly returning to his face.

Night fell over Hollowbarn as Urmir slept, wrapped in heavy furs before the fire. Rugnar sat nearby, his heavy frame hunched forward, staring into the flames, his mug of dark ale forgotten in his hand.

When Urmir finally stirred, it was with a low, broken sound. His eyes opened, hollow and bloodshot. He tried to rise but Rugnar pressed a firm hand to his shoulder.

"Rest, brother," Rugnar said quietly. "You're safe."

For a long while, there was only the crackle of the fire.

Then Urmir spoke, his voice raw and scraping.

"The war took it all, Rugnar," he said. "My farm… my sons... my wife. All gone. The fire came. Raiders came. I fought but... I couldn't save them."

Tears carved silent tracks down his scarred cheeks.

"I ran after... ran so far... but there's nowhere left to run to."

Rugnar said nothing. He only reached out, resting a thick, calloused hand on Urmir's shoulder. A warrior's comfort. A brother's bond.

The fire crackled on, throwing long shadows across the room as old wounds, new griefs, and heavy silences settled deep into the heart of Hollowbarn.

The next morning broke sharper and colder than the last, the ground hard with a crust of early frost. Rugnar rose early, his muscles aching from the days of toil and battle, but there was a task needing doing beyond fields or barns. Urmir sat by the fire, bundled in a borrowed cloak, a mug of thin broth in his hands. His eyes followed Rugnar with a quiet that spoke of a man not sure he deserved another chance.

"Come on," Rugnar said, shouldering his hammer and tossing Urmir a battered old coat. "Time to find you a roof."

Urmir struggled to his feet, grimacing at the pain lancing through his side, but he followed without complaint. Together they crossed the village green, past the forge where Gerf hammered away at a new plow blade, past Mara's herb gardens where she sang softly to herself as she tended winter flowers. They came to a small stone cottage near the edge of the village, its door hanging askew, one shutter broken loose in the wind.

The old place had been empty since Old Varn marched off to the war and never returned.

Rugnar shoved the door open with his boot. Dust and the sharp smell of dry rot rushed out.

"She's rough," Rugnar said, scratching his beard. "But the walls stand, and the hearth still draws."

Urmir looked around slowly, his hand trailing along the cracked stone. "Feels... like a home once."

Rugnar grunted. "Could be again."

He turned, meeting Urmir’s eye squarely. "But listen well: Hollowbarn’s no charity. No man lives here for free. You’ll work, same as the rest. Fields, fences, huntin’, haulin’—whatever’s needed. Till you can stand on your own."

Urmir smiled then, a dry, cracked thing but honest. "Fair trade. Better than the grave I left behind."

Without another word, they set to work.

The sun climbed higher as they cleared out the dust, hauling broken furniture into a pile outside to burn. Rugnar found a spare hammer and together they climbed onto the sagging roof, mending the beams with old planks salvaged from the storage barn. The fence out front had collapsed under years of storms and neglect; Urmir dug the posts free with a grim determination, setting new ones with heavy stones at their base.

As they worked, the rhythm of labor loosened something tight between them.

"You remember," Rugnar said, grinning as he passed Urmir a battered iron nail, "that time we nicked the captain’s ale barrel while arrows were flyin' thicker than midges?"

Urmir barked a rough laugh, steadying a beam with one hand. "I remember you near drownin' in the barrel trying to hide it!"

Rugnar laughed so hard he nearly drove a nail into his thumb. "Worth every beating we took after."

"And you," Urmir said, pointing a crooked finger at Rugnar, "I still remember that time you caught an arrow in the rear and still held the line like some mad ox."

Rugnar's face turned a shade redder than the morning chill. "It weren't my finest moment," he grumbled, "but it made for good tales at the fire."

They hammered, lifted, and mended until the shadows grew long and the cottage looked less like a ruin and more like a home. Smoke curled from the rebuilt hearth as Mara brought over a loaf of fresh bread and a wedge of hard cheese, leaving them with a soft word and a nod.

Urmir sat on the new front step, staring into the deepening twilight.

"You didn’t have to do this," he said, voice low.

Rugnar sat beside him, puffing slow clouds of pipe smoke into the crisp air. "Didn’t have to," he agreed. "But some debts don't fade. And brothers ain’t meant to be left in the dark."

Together, they watched the last light fade behind the hills, the simple warmth of Hollowbarn settling in their bones like the slow promise of a better tomorrow.

The days slipped by as Hollowbarn settled into the slow, patient rhythm of work and winter's approach. Urmir, once a broken wraith of a man, found his strength returning bit by bit. He

rose with the sun, even when his body screamed protest, and worked alongside Rugnar with a quiet, stubborn determination that earned the respect of the village without a single boast.

Together they plowed the fields, driving the creaking plow through thick, stubborn soil. Urmir's limp lessened with each passing day, his shoulders regaining their old breadth. They cut timber from the woods on Hollowbarn's edge, sweating through their shirts as they felled trees and hauled rough-hewn logs back for the smithy and winter repairs. He mucked the stalls, fed the animals, mended fences, and chopped firewood until his palms were raw and bloodied.

He never complained. Never asked for less.

At night, after the day's work was done, Rugnar and Urmir would sit together on the wide bench Rugnar had built outside his cottage. The stars would hang cold and bright overhead, and the sharp smell of Mara's spiced cider would fill the air as they drank from rough clay mugs.

"You remember the Battle of Frostpass?" Urmir asked one evening, his voice rough but steady, a crooked smile tugging at his scarred face. "Just thirty of us against three hundred horsemen."

Rugnar growled low in his chest, blowing a thick cloud of pipe smoke into the chill air. "Aye. Like starvin' wolves against a pack of fat deer with lances."

Urmir chuckled. "You were raging like a man possessed... but it was me who lost my damned sword. Dropped it right into the river when we tried to cross."

Rugnar laughed, a deep belly laugh that rumbled out into the night. "You fought barehanded after that, like a mad dog. I saw you tear a man from his horse by the throat!"

Urmir shrugged with mock modesty. "Did what needed doing."

They sat in comfortable silence for a while after that, watching the fireflies dance in the fields beyond the fences, sipping their cider slowly.

There was something rare between them now—a kind of warmth not born from easy friendship, but from long battles survived and debts honored without words. It wasn't something either man would speak of. It didn't need speaking. It was there in the way they worked side by side without needing to ask, in the way they shared drink and memory without awkwardness, in the way Hollowbarn, once merely a village for each, had become home.

Rugnar refilled both their mugs from the clay jug Mara had left earlier, the spices curling up like woodsmoke.

"You're a stubborn bastard, Urmir," Rugnar said gruffly, clinking his mug against the other's.

Urmir grinned through broken teeth. "Takes one to know one."

The stars wheeled slowly overhead, and Hollowbarn slept peacefully under their watch.

The dawn broke cold and thin, a pale ribbon of light stretching across the frost-bitten fields of Hollowbarn. Rugnar stood by his window, a mug of bitter black tea in hand, watching the steam curl in the chill air. The world outside lay still, wrapped in a fragile hush.

Then he saw movement—steady, purposeful.

Urmir came marching down the worn track from his cottage, a heavy burlap sack slung over one shoulder. His limp was gone, replaced by a strong, measured stride. He wore no armor now, only a thick wool tunic and boots caked with the morning's frost. Rugnar watched in silence as Urmir knelt at the edge of Rugnar's fields, the earth already dark and rich from weeks of labor.

Without ceremony, Urmir opened the sack. Barley seed spilled into his rough hands, and with slow, deliberate care, he began planting them into the furrowed earth, one handful at a time.

He said nothing. No grand speeches. No promises.

It was a gift. A silent oath of loyalty.

Rugnar stepped outside, the cold biting at his skin, and crossed the short distance between them. He stood over Urmir as the man finished sowing the last seeds, the two of them breathing in the cold morning stillness.

For a long while, Rugnar said nothing.

Then he simply reached out and clapped Urmir hard on the shoulder, the kind of blow that said more than words ever could. Urmir only nodded, his face roughened by the years but his eyes clear now, steady.

That night, the hearth of Hollowbarn blazed with warmth. Rugnar, Urmir, Thori, and Elixa sat around the wide stone fireplace in Rugnar's cottage, mugs of ale and cider in hand, a fresh loaf from Mara resting on the table alongside a haunch of salted boar.

The firelight danced across their faces, catching the lines and scars, the battered edges of lives hard-fought but not yet surrendered. Laughter bubbled up easily, stories flowing between them like old rivers finding their course again.

Thori told of a drunk halfling she'd once wrestled for a bag of stolen silver; Elixa dryly recounted a duel she'd won by tripping a pompous knight into a pig trough.

Even Urmir, who had once seemed a man made only of ashes, found himself chuckling, his hand tapping the rhythm of an old soldier's song against the arm of his chair.

And in a quiet moment, between laughter and the crackle of the fire, Rugnar muttered low, almost as if to himself:

"World broke us, Urmir. Broke us into pieces."

He looked into the flames, his voice steady.

"But here... we build it back. One field. One home. One brother at a time."

Urmir raised his mug silently in answer.

They drank, the firelight warming more than just their bodies. Outside, the night deepened over Hollowbarn, but within the little stone walls, a new chapter had begun—built from loss, bound by loyalty, and lit by the stubborn flame of hope.

The wagon clattered down the winding road toward Ironhelm under a sky brushed with thin streaks of cloud. Rugnar held the reins with a steady hand, the worn wagon groaning under the weight of four determined souls: himself, Urmir, Thori, and Elixa. They sat wrapped in their cloaks, the autumn chill cutting sharp through the rising mist.

Ironhelm rose before them in the late morning light, its towers grim and proud, its old dwarven stonework gleaming with the polish of centuries. The streets were alive with the chaos of market day: merchants shouting their wares, smiths hammering on anvils in open stalls, smells of roasting meat, boiling leather, and fresh bread filling the air.

"Feels like a different world here," Urmir muttered, gazing up at the crowds bustling through the wide stone avenues.

"Aye," Rugnar grunted. "A world where your coin walks off quicker than your boots wear out."

They tied the mule and wagon in a narrow side yard and set off into the throng. First stop: the armorsmith.

The shop was a wide, low building, the heavy scent of oil and steel hanging thick. Inside, a dwarf smith with a nose like a squashed potato and forearms as thick as Rugnar’s thighs looked up from a half-formed breastplate.

"What you after, lads and lass?" he barked.

Rugnar stepped forward, eyeing a magnificent suit of plate mail displayed against the far wall. "That armor there. Plate mail. And a large shield."

The smith leaned on his anvil, squinting. "That’ll run ye four hundred fifty for the full kit."

"Four hundred," Rugnar said, crossing his arms. "And I'll throw in this fine chainmail to sweeten the pot."

He dumped his chainmail onto the counter with a metallic crash. The smith grunted, examining it.

"Good steel... needs a bit o’ patchin’." He scratched his chin. "Four hundred fifteen."

"Four hundred even, or I take my coin to Hammerdell’s across the square," Rugnar said with a grumble.

The smith muttered a few dwarven curses under his breath but finally slapped the counter. "Fine. Four hundred even."

With a grin, Rugnar counted out the coin, and soon he stood clad in gleaming plate, his new shield slung proudly over his shoulder. He bought a sturdy leather backpack, some bundles of candles, a large wooden chest, a small belt pouch, a good thick leather belt, and rations enough to last a good fortnight.

While he strapped his new gear into place, he caught Urmir glancing at a battered set of leather armor and a simple short sword.

"You'll be needing these," Rugnar said, clapping him on the back.

"I can't afford—" Urmir started.

"My coin, my say," Rugnar grunted. "You'll pay me back with sweat."

The smith offered the leather armor for five gold and the short sword for eight. Rugnar haggled the shield down to ten gold with little fuss. Urmir also picked out a pair of decent boots and a faded green cloak that hung like a shadow across his shoulders.

"Looks like a proper fighter now," Thori said, elbowing Urmir lightly.

They moved through the market after that, picking up a light riding horse—a feisty dun mare with a suspicious eye—and a broad, slow ox for fieldwork. Rugnar haggled over saddles, rope, and other supplies with merchants who smelled of dust and sweat.

Between stops, they ducked into a small open-air tavern by the market square. They ordered mugs of cheap ale, fresh bread, roasted onions, and a hunk of goat's meat, sitting at a wobbly wooden table beneath a crooked awning.

"That plate's going to slow you down, old bear," Thori teased, tearing into a hunk of meat.

"Good," Rugnar said, chewing thoughtfully. "Means they'll tire themselves out hammerin' at me before I tire swingin' back."

Elixa leaned her spear against the table and chuckled. "You'll be a walking wall. A wall with bad breath."

Urmir, sitting quietly, finally cracked a smile. "Better a wall than a grave."

The noise of Ironhelm bustled around them: the clash of hammers, the cries of vendors hawking bolts of silk and barrels of salt fish, the laughter of children darting through the crowd. Horses clopped past on stone streets slick from morning dew, and the sharp scent of forge smoke lingered under the spiced air of the food stalls.

They finished their meal, wiped their hands, and stood, heavier of purse but lighter of worries, the weight of new armor and new hopes settling on their shoulders.

It was a good day, Rugnar thought as he swung himself back into the wagon. Not an easy one. But a good one.

Tomorrow, they'd ride back to Hollowbarn, richer in gear, in strength, and in something harder to name: a band of warriors, beaten but unbowed, ready for whatever the wide, cruel world might throw at them next.

The Crest of Ironhold

The streets of Ironhelm buzzed beneath the midday sun, thick with merchants' cries, clattering hooves, and the iron scent of forge smoke. Rugnar and his companions pushed their way through the crowd, all freshly equipped, the weight of new weapons and armor clinking with every step. They passed through the broad arch of the Mercenaries' Quarter, where warriors of every stripe gathered: grim-faced veterans, cocky young blades, and foreign sellswords trading tall tales and heavier threats.

It was Thori who spotted it first—a thick, weathered notice board bolted into the stone of a tavern wall. Nails stuck out like thorns, fliers layered in overlapping sheets, but one caught her eye: bold dwarven script in red-black ink across thick parchment.

"400 GOLD COIN. CREST OF IRONHOLD LOST TO ORC RAID. RECOVERY AND CLEANSING REQUIRED. REPORT TO THE GUILDHALL."

She tore it free, handed it to Rugnar, and the group exchanged quick glances.

"Sounds like the kind of trouble we don't say no to," Urmir muttered.

"Aye," Rugnar grunted. "Let's see who's payin'."

The Ironhelm Fighters' Guild was a squat, angular fortress of granite built into the side of a trade tower, its walls bristling with iron-tipped pikes and old trophies—shields cracked by ogre blows, skulls from dark beasts mounted in quiet threat. Inside, the stone walls were carved with ancient scenes of dwarven valor, the air thick with the musk of oil, steel, and sweat.

Behind an iron-plated desk sat a hulking half-orc, his skin a dark mossy green, his left tusk chipped down to the root. He leaned over a map, brow furrowed, scars crawling like pale worms across his jaw and throat.

He looked up as they approached.

"Got eyes on the notice?" he asked, voice low and sandpaper rough.

Rugnar handed him the flier. "We're interested."

The half-orc gave a single nod. "Name's Ruk-Grgkh. Don't bother trying to pronounce it all—just Ruk'll do. You're not the first to look at this job. But the first smart enough to still be breathin' after a day in the hills."

He tapped a heavy finger on a detailed map. "Caravan got jumped two weeks back. Gold, weapons, and the Ironhold crest—a shield with the royal sigil—taken. Witnesses say it was mountain orcs, Varn-Blood tribe. Nasty bastards. They dragged the spoils back to Stonejaw Crag. You lot heard of it?"

"Old dwarven outpost," Thori said grimly. "Sealed a century ago. Last clan in there died fightin' trolls."

"Then it’s no stranger to blood," Ruk grunted. "The orcs are holed up tight. Scouts say the crag's got twisting tunnels, pit traps, even war beasts penned below. But if you can breach the place and recover that crest... the gold's yours. Four hundred. And whatever else you find down there."

Elixa leaned on her spear. "Dangerous company pays well."

"That’s the idea," Ruk said. "But don’t think it’s a rescue. You’ll be waist-deep in blades and bones before you even sniff the crest. If you're not ready to lose a limb, walk out now."

Rugnar just nodded. "We’ve fought worse in the dark."

Thori stepped away briefly and returned with a fresh suit of chain mail, bought from a nearby smith’s stall for a fair coin. She buckled it on with practiced ease, the metal catching the light like ice. "If I’m going into tunnels full of orcs," she said, "I’ll be needing proper skin."

Ruk tossed a scroll onto the desk. "Map’ll guide you near enough. Beyond that, you'll be on your own."

The group left the guildhall with weightier packs and heavier thoughts. The road ahead would be cold and steep. But there was coin to earn, honor to reclaim, and orcs to bury.

And for warriors like them, that was all the reason they needed.

The wind was sharp as knives when they began their climb into the Stonejaw Mountains. Rugnar led the way, heavy plate armor gleaming dully under the grey sky, his hammer slung over one shoulder, his breath fogging before him in thick clouds. Urmir walked with practiced silence, his short sword at his side, eyes always scanning the ridges. Thori and Elixa flanked them, the former in her new chain mail, the latter moving with her usual quiet grace, spear in hand.

The path twisted upward, cut into steep, narrow ledges that crumbled underfoot. Nights were bitter—shelters made from rough stone windbreaks and wet cloaks. Fires sputtered in the wind, their warmth pitiful, but it was enough to cook salted meat and share a skin of Mara’s cider passed between them.

On the third day, with the clouds rolling low above them and the cliffs dropping sheer to either side, the wind shifted.

Rugnar stopped mid-step. "You hear that?"

A soft song drifted on the breeze. Haunting, beautiful. Too beautiful.

"Down!" Elixa hissed, snapping a hand over her ear.

But it was too late for Urmir. His face went slack, mouth slightly open. Slowly, he turned toward the cliff's edge.

"Urmir!" Thori shouted, lunging to grab his arm.

Above, shadows circled.

A flock of Harpies swooped down, claws extended, songs rising to a fever pitch. Rugnar roared, throwing his shield up just as one struck. He slammed his hammer into its chest, sending it spiraling off the edge in a mess of broken wings. Thori held Urmir back while swinging wild at a harpy clawing toward her face. Elixa, teeth clenched, hurled her spear in a clean arc, impaling one midair. The song fractured, and the spell broke.

Urmir gasped, blinking. "What—?"

"Shut up and swing!" Thori growled.

In moments, it was done. Harpies lay broken on the cliffside, and the others had fled.

They pressed on.

On the fifth day, the trail narrowed between high crags, dusted with snow. The wind died—and the silence was too complete.

Then it came.

A terrible cry shattered the stillness, and from the ridge above, a Chimera plunged down—three heads snarling, wings flared, tail whipping like a serpent.

Rugnar barely had time to raise his shield before fire spewed from its maw. Thori was caught in the edge of the blast, her cloak and arm catching fire. She screamed, rolling in the snow.

"Thori!" Elixa shouted, launching herself into the fray. While Rugnar and Urmir flanked the beast, drawing its fury, Elixa charged straight for the lion head, driving her spear deep beneath its jaw. It reared, shrieking.

Urmir leapt atop a boulder, slashing at the wings, while Rugnar drove his hammer into the goat head, shattering bone. Finally, the beast collapsed in a mass of steaming blood and tangled limbs.

They spent hours licking wounds that night. Thori's arm was raw, blistered—but she lived.

"Didn't think you had wings, Elixa," she muttered.

"I don't," Elixa said, binding Thori's burns. "But I know when to stab something loud and stupid."

By the seventh day, they were ragged, bruised, but still moving. The highlands grew colder, the wind sharp with ash and old blood. Discarded bones lay along the path—some human, some orc, many stripped to the marrow. Black-feathered arrows stuck in frozen stumps, and strange stone cairns marked the way forward.

That evening, as the sun bled behind the peaks, they saw it.

Stonejaw Crag loomed like a broken tooth against the sky—jagged, ancient, and grim. Smoke curled from vents near its base. Fires lit the slits in the walls. War drums echoed faintly from within.

Rugnar spat into the wind.

"Time to knock," he said, his voice like gravel and fire.

And they pressed forward into the dark.

Night clung to the crag like a living thing as Rugnar, Urmir, Thori, and Elixa crept toward a shadowed cleft in the stone at the base of Stonejaw Crag. An old mine entrance, long abandoned and half-choked by fallen rocks and creeping moss, yawned before them—a forgotten back door into the fortress above.

“No patrols near this,” Urmir muttered, eyeing the darkness warily.

“Orcs never liked the deep places,” Rugnar grunted. “Too many older things down there.”

They slipped inside, torches low, the light barely pushing against the crushing gloom. The air grew damp and cold. Old mine carts lay rusting on broken rails, and skeletal beams sagged under the weight of centuries.

They had not gone far when the stone beside them shifted.

A Giant Cave Lizard, its mottled grey hide blending seamlessly with the walls, sprang from its perch without a sound. Its massive jaws clamped down on Urmir’s shoulder, throwing him hard against the rock. He grunted in pain, blood darkening his cloak.

"Get it off him!" Thori bellowed.

Rugnar charged, slamming his shield into the beast's flank with a grunt, forcing it to release Urmir. Elixa thrust her spear into the lizard’s exposed belly, and Thori’s axe sang through the air, biting deep into the creature’s neck. It thrashed once, twice, and then slumped, twitching in the dirt.

Urmir staggered upright, clutching his torn shoulder. "I've had softer welcomes."

"You’re still pretty enough," Thori said with a grim grin, handing him a torn strip of cloth to bind the wound.

They pressed onward, deeper into the twisting tunnels. The walls narrowed and twisted into jagged halls, the earth itself seeming to groan and shudder under some unseen weight.

They reached a wide cavern where shattered pillars lay scattered across the ground like broken bones. As they picked their way through, a screech split the air—a harsh, metallic rasp that set their teeth on edge.

Hook Horrors.

The creatures burst from the ceiling, scuttling down walls with horrifying speed, their chitinous claws clicking like knives on stone. Their heavy hooked limbs swung wildly, seeking to drag prey back into the dark.

One snatched Elixa around the waist, yanking her off her feet before she could even scream. She kicked and stabbed, but the creature hauled her toward a darkened side chamber.

"Elixa!" Rugnar roared.

He and Thori charged the remaining Hook Horrors. Rugnar's hammer crushed one's skull with a sickening crunch, while Thori cleaved another in two with a furious overhead strike. Urmir, despite his injury, darted after the creature dragging Elixa, short sword flashing.

They found her struggling against the beast in a narrow passage, her spear pinned uselessly against the wall. Urmir lunged, burying his blade into the Hook Horror's exposed side. It screeched, releasing Elixa just long enough for her to rip free and drive her dagger deep into its eye.

Panting, battered, but alive, they pulled back into a narrow alcove nearby—a half-collapsed chamber littered with rubble and old mining tools. Rugnar set a small fire, the flickering flame casting uncertain shadows across their grim faces.

They tended their wounds in silence. Blood was wiped away. Bandages tied tight. Armor repaired with quick hands and muttered oaths.

Just as Rugnar was binding the last cut on Thori's arm, a low sound began to pulse through the stone—the deep, rhythmic pounding of war drums. The sound grew louder, vibrating through the walls, as if a giant heart had begun to beat deep within the mountain.

They exchanged grim looks, every one of them knowing what it meant.

The orcs knew they were here.

And they would be waiting.

The fire burned low in the alcove as Rugnar kicked dirt over it, grinding the embers into darkness. No words were needed. They checked their weapons, tightened their belts, and pressed onward into the crushing dark of the old tunnels.

The air grew colder, and the walls tighter, narrowing into a single long hall lined with cracked dwarf-work stone. It felt wrong — too open, too silent.

Thori, leading, took one cautious step forward — and the ground beneath her right boot cracked open.

"Trap!" she barked, hurling herself backward just in time. A pit of rusted iron spikes yawned open, wicked and jagged. The old mechanism had been cunningly hidden under a false floor of stone slabs. Dust and air rushed downward into the darkness below.

"Crafty bastards," Rugnar growled, hefting his warhammer.

He found the rusted lever half-hidden in a recess along the wall and smashed it with a single mighty blow. The mechanism shrieked like a wounded beast as gears ground to a halt. The trap groaned and sagged back into uselessness.

"Keep your eyes sharp," Urmir muttered, clutching his short sword tighter. "They built this place to kill intruders."

Past the hall, a wider cavern opened — and the smell hit them first. Sweat, rot, and something fouler still. Shadows moved across the far end: thick, hulking shapes hefting crude iron clubs.

Ogrillons.

Orc-ogre hybrids, ugly and stupid, but devastating in a brawl. Three of them lumbered forward, their yellowed tusks gleaming in the dim torchlight, clubs dragging across the stone with horrible screeches.

Rugnar took the first step forward, shield raised. "No running now!"

The battle erupted with brutal, ugly force.

One Ogrillon swung its club overhead with the force of a falling tree. Urmir tried to dodge, but the weapon clipped him across the ribs, sending him flying into a heap of broken stone. He lay gasping, blood seeping through his tunic.

Elixa darted to his side, thrusting her spear low into the gut of the nearest brute while Thori scrambled up onto a pile of fallen rocks, hacking downward with her axe.

Rugnar drew the attention of the largest, battering against its thick hide with hammer and shield, trading bone-jarring blows. Blood splashed across the stone as the monsters swung wildly, snarling and bellowing.

"Draw 'em to the rocks!" Rugnar barked between strikes.

The others shifted position quickly, forcing the ogrillons to climb over uneven stone while they rained down strikes from higher ground. Thori's axe cleaved a hand from one monster; it howled and fell backward, shrieking into the pit below.

Elixa’s spear found a gap in another's armor, and with a sickening wrench, she drove the point home between its ribs. It staggered, gurgled, and collapsed.

Rugnar, bleeding from a gash across his forehead, swung his hammer in a full circle and smashed the last one’s skull with a sound like a hammer cracking a melon.

For a moment, the only sound was heavy breathing and the slow drip of blood onto the cavern floor.

Urmir groaned but stood, clutching his side. "Nothing... broken that wasn't already half-cracked," he muttered with a grin.

They bound wounds quickly, working in silence.

Beyond the dead lay another door — ancient, ironbound, and framed with runes long worn smooth. A dwarven portcullis hung heavy in the archway, but time had twisted it: bones of fallen warriors clogged the lower edges, and great spires of ice had fused it into place.

Rugnar placed a gloved hand against the cold iron.

"This was once a place of pride," he murmured.

"And now?" Thori asked, wiping her blade clean.

"Now," Rugnar said, tightening his grip on his hammer, "it's a tomb."

The firelight flickered low behind them. The fortress lay ahead, and with it, the crest they had come to reclaim — or die trying.

The portcullis groaned like a dying beast as Rugnar and Thori heaved it upward, bones cracking and ice snapping away in sharp shards. With one final grunt, they forced the rusted gate just high enough to crawl beneath, and one by one, the party slipped through into the belly of the stronghold.

The main hall of Stonejaw Crag sprawled before them like a cathedral of ruin — once a proud dwarven chamber, now desecrated and blackened by fire. Orcish banners, crude and stinking of blood, hung over fallen pillars. Scorched murals once depicting the glory of Ironhold were smeared with filth and handprints in dried gore. Bones littered the floor, some gnawed, others shattered for marrow.

And at the far end, rising from broken stone and ash, sat the throne of Ironhold — defiled, defaced — and standing before it was the orc warchief.

Broad-shouldered and snarling, his eyes gleamed with bloodlust, and around his neck, dangling on a thick chain, was the Ironhold Crest — the royal dwarven sigil, dulled but unmistakable. Flanking him were Worg-mounted orcs, their beasts snarling and pacing, and towering above all was a massive two-headed Ettin clad in scavenged armor, each head bickering with the other in guttural tones.

"Grukk-Mul hungry!" one head growled.

"Shut up, let kill now!" barked the other.

The moment they were spotted, the warhorn blew — low, thunderous, and final.

The battle exploded into motion.

Elixa charged first, her spear flashing as she vaulted over shattered stone. A Worg lunged toward her, its rider bellowing, but she planted her spear under its ribs and turned the charge into a spin, shoving beast and rider off a ledge into the dark below.

“Next!” she shouted, blood in her teeth.

Thori and Urmir flanked the Ettin, dodging the massive club swings that smashed stone like clay. Urmir rolled under one wild arc, slashing the Ettin's leg tendons, while Thori drove her axe into its ribs. The twin heads roared in discordant pain, swinging madly and sending a statue of a dwarven king crashing down.

In the center of it all, Rugnar pushed through fire and chaos, shield raised, eyes locked on the warchief.

The orc snarled, baring tusks. “You come for crest?” he growled in thick Common, drawing a cruel black axe. “You’ll die with empty hands.”

“Come and take mine first,” Rugnar spat.

They clashed like titans, hammer against axe, shield against brute force. Sparks flew as metal rang on metal, each blow shaking the bones of the hall. The warchief was strong — but Rugnar was stronger. He took a gash to the side, but did not fall. He broke the orc's guard with a shield slam, caught the follow-up axe blow on the rim, and then drove forward with all his weight.

With a roar that echoed through the ruined hall, Rugnar brought his warhammer down in a crushing arc, splintering the orc's breastplate and driving him to the stones in a heap of shattered bone and dying breath.

The Ironhold Crest clattered to the floor, blood-slick but whole.

The battle waned. The Ettin collapsed under Thori's final blow, its heads twitching. The last Worg bolted, its rider screaming as Elixa hurled a javelin through his back. Urmir leaned on his sword, panting, bruised and bloodied but standing tall. They passed the healing potion around the party.

Rugnar picked up the crest, turning it over in his calloused hands.

"Let's take it home," he said quietly.

Around him, the ruined throne chamber lay quiet once more — broken, but reclaimed by fire, steel, and the will of hard folk who would not bend.

With the Ironhold Crest wrapped in thick cloth and tucked securely in Rugnar's pack, the companions scoured the ruined stronghold one last time. The vaults beneath the old throne room had been pillaged by orcs, but not without care—many of the dwarven treasures had been stashed for later looting.

They found sealed chests of silver and copper, broken armor with gold inlay, and three blades of dwarven make—short, broad, and runed. Ancient toolkits, ornate drinking horns, and a crushed silver circlet were tucked into sacks, and by the time they were done, they had scraped together an extra 500 gold in total, burdening their packs and belts with hard-earned weight.

As they descended the mountain paths, the wind sharper and colder now, their breaths plumed before them like smoke. The road down was harder than the climb—each step felt heavier, each hour grinding against bone and bruises.

It was at a narrow river crossing, no more than a rocky ford, where the last challenge came. The troll scent hit them first—rot and mildew, like meat left too long in a cave. Then came the sound: heavy, wet footsteps, and the splash of something massive moving against the current.

Two Mountain Trolls emerged from the mist. Towering, long-limbed things with moss and fungus clinging to their hides, their eyes tiny with hunger.

"No time for rest," Urmir muttered, drawing his blade, bloodied tunic fluttering in the river wind.

The fight was short but brutal. The first troll crashed into them like a landslide. Rugnar met it head-on, his warhammer smashing its wrist and then its jaw. Thori slipped beneath it and drove her axe into the back of its knee, toppling it. Elixa used the river's edge to her advantage, leaping from a rock and burying her spear into the eye socket of the second beast, just before it could drag Urmir under.

They burned the corpses quickly, despite the wet wood and smoke that stung their eyes. Trolls didn't stay dead unless you made sure of it.

By the time Ironhelm's dark stone gates came into view, their boots were soaked, their armor torn, and their bodies worn to the core—but they were alive, and they were whole.

The Fighters' Guild was quiet when they returned, the cold of the highlands still clinging to their cloaks. Ruk-Grgkh looked up from his desk, his good eye narrowing.

"You brought it?"

Rugnar unwrapped the crest and set it down on the table. The old dwarven sigil caught the torch light, scratched but proud.

Ruk ran a hand over the metal reverently, then grunted. "Didn't think you'd all make it."

Thori leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "Neither did the orcs."

Ruk tossed them a pouch heavy with coin. "Four hundred, as promised. And if you're smart, you'll spend it before someone sees your faces and offers you another job."

That night, they returned to the Cask and Toad. The hearth burned hot, the ale flowed strong, and even the rowdiest patrons lowered their voices when the four warriors took their table.

Rugnar, with bruises still purple across his jaw, raised his mug.

"To iron crests and bloody paths."

Thori clinked her cup against his. "And to axes in troll guts."

Elixa smiled faintly, leaning back. "To not dying in a crag full of monsters."

Urmir just drank deep and laughed like a man returned from the dead.

The tavern hummed around them, but their corner was quiet, save for laughter, the clatter of mugs, and the slow telling of a tale that would soon spread across the northern halls—a story of fire, steel, and a crest won back in blood.

And outside, the cold wind howled across the mountains, carrying word of their deeds into the deep stone halls of dwarves and the shadowed woods beyond.

Stone Words and Broken Oaths

The morning mist still clung to the crooked alleys of Ironhelm when the summons came.

A young dwarf, panting from a hard run, found Rugnar and his companions at the Cask and Toad just after sunrise. He carried a sealed parchment, heavy with the wax mark of the Stonemason’s Guild. Without waiting for food or drink, Rugnar broke the seal and read the simple but heavy words: *By order of Guildmaster Bargrin Ironpick, you are summoned to the Council Hall.*

None of them needed convincing. In Ironhelm, a summons like that wasn’t a request — it was the old stone calling, and you answered.

The Council Hall was a massive chamber carved directly into the mountain’s heart, the walls lined with statues of dwarves whose deeds had shaped the city's bones. Heavy chains supported iron braziers that threw flickering light against the smooth granite floor. Ten council seats sat in a half-circle at the far end, though today only one was filled.

Bargrin Ironpick sat alone, his once-black beard now silver and braided thickly, a heavy chain of office resting across his shoulders. His hands were worn and calloused, the hands of a mason who had shaped stone longer than most men had lived. His eyes were sharp, undulled by age, and as Rugnar and the others approached, he stood with a slow, deliberate motion.

"Rugnar of Hollowbarn," Bargrin rumbled, his voice like the grinding of earth. "And your companions. You’ve made a name. One not bought with songs, but with blood and stone."

Rugnar bowed his head respectfully. "We came as summoned, Guildmaster."

Bargrin gestured for them to sit on the stone benches before him, and when they had, he leaned heavily against the great stone table.

"Trouble brews beneath Ironhelm," he said, voice low. "Not from orcs, nor trolls, but from our own kin. Two ancient clans—Stoneaxe and Oreforge—have stumbled into old anger."

He paused, as if weighing each word like a mason placing stones.

"Deep under the city, beneath vaults sealed since the Elder Wars, a hall was unearthed during the mining expansions. A hall vast and old—its walls rich with veins of silver and black iron. Both clans lay claim to it. Both say it was promised to them by blood and stone."

He sighed, the weight of centuries pressing into that single breath.

"Words have turned sharp. Threats have been spoken in dark corners. If nothing is done, we’ll have blood feud in the halls again. Ironhelm cannot survive dwarves fighting dwarves."

He looked up, meeting each of their eyes.

"You are outsiders to our clans, yet respected by our people. You have fought with honor, bled for these mountains. I ask you to act as mediators. Hear the claims. Find the truth, if there is one. Bring peace before we tear ourselves apart."

Thori leaned forward, frowning deeply. "No axes? No blades?"

"No," Bargrin said firmly. "Only words. Only honor."

Urmir shifted, glancing at Rugnar. "We're soldiers," he said. "Not diplomats."

Bargrin nodded slowly. "That's why you'll succeed. You understand the cost of blood better than any merchant or priest."

The hall fell silent but for the distant echo of hammer blows somewhere deep below.

Finally, Rugnar stood, the great weight of what had been asked sinking into his bones.

"We'll do it," he said. "We'll keep the mountain whole."

Bargrin's face broke into the faintest hint of a smile — a crack in stone that rarely showed.

"Then go. Hear them out. Weigh their words like gold on a scale. And find a path before anger buries us all."

The task weighed heavier with each step they took down Ironhelm's ancient corridors. Rugnar led the way through the winding tunnels of the lower districts, the air thicker here, heavy with the scent of earth and old iron. Beside him walked Thori, her face drawn in grim lines. Urmir and Elixa kept silent, understanding the importance of this task lay not in swords or shields, but in words chosen like stones for a high wall.

They were shown first to the chambers of Clan Stoneaxe.

Durgrin Stoneaxe stood waiting for them, broad and barrel-chested even by dwarven standards. His hair was a river of grey and black, braided thick over his shoulders, and his beard bore iron rings stamped with old clan marks. His face, lined by years of pride and battle, creased further when he saw Rugnar.

"Bah," Durgrin snorted. "They send farmers and sellswords to settle matters of blood?"

Rugnar gave no offense in his stance, only nodding. "They send those without ties to either grudge, Durgrin Stoneaxe."

Durgrin grunted, as if accepting the point under protest.

He gestured to a cracked stone map laid out before him on a slab table. It depicted the lower tunnels—one branch marked with deep carvings.

"There," he said, stabbing a thick finger onto the map. "That hall was ours long before the Oreforges hammered their first anvil. Look at the shield carvings on the pillars—each one bears the crossed hammers and broken shield of Stoneaxe blood."

Thori leaned over the table, studying the map. "And what proof binds these marks to your claim?"

Durgrin’s jaw tightened. "Our forefathers carried those emblems into the Elder Wars. Songs speak of it. Carvings bear it. There's no other truth to find."

Rugnar pressed further, careful to keep his tone respectful. "Are there witnesses beyond the shield marks? Records? A relic perhaps, tied to those who first carved the hall?"

Durgrin hesitated, then grunted. "Some records were lost... during the Black Years. But tradition remembers what stone forgets."

Satisfied they had pressed as far as honor would allow, the party excused themselves and made their way across the Hall to the quarters of Clan Oreforge.

Marra Oreforge greeted them with a very different air—sharp-eyed and cool, her armor chased with silver filigree. Her smile was thin and without warmth, but her words were precise as any stonemason’s chisel.

"You come seeking truth," she said, leading them into a polished chamber where scrolls and stone tablets lined the walls. "Good. There’s too much shouting and too little thinking."

She unrolled a faded vellum map, its edges cracked with age.

"The hall is not an inheritance," she said crisply. "It’s a forge hall, built by my ancestors. See these symbols?"

She pointed to markings along the wall—the same crossed hammers, but paired with a mason’s square and chisel.

"Construction marks," she said. "Signatures of those who built the hall, not ruled it."

Elixa leaned closer, frowning. "Stoneaxe claims they are blood-marks."

Marra scoffed. "Blood-marks are framed within a clan crest. These are open—a mason's pride, not a lord's claim."

Rugnar asked carefully, "Have you heirlooms to back this? Records or oaths sworn?"

Marra nodded. "We hold three mason’s contracts from the Deep Vault years. Copies, aye, but old and preserved. They place my ancestors at the roots of this hall."

Thori, arms crossed, spoke with careful weight. "And no witness alive to vouch it?"

Marra's lips tightened. "Only the stone remembers that far back."

The meeting ended in formal courtesy, but beneath the words, tension crackled. Neither clan would bend easily, and if pressed wrong, either could turn to violence.

As the party left the council floor, Rugnar blew out a long breath through his beard.

"This will not be settled with truth alone," he muttered. "We'll need to find something more."

Thori nodded grimly. "Stone and oaths won't be enough. Pride's heavier than iron here."

Ahead, the shadowed hallways of Ironhelm awaited, their stones heavy with the weight of old grudges and broken promises.

The halls of Ironhelm seemed colder as Rugnar and his companions delved deeper into the tangled roots of the feud. Day after day, they sat at long stone tables and stood in smoke-wreathed chambers, listening to gruff voices recount slights so old they had the feel of legend rather than memory.

The story became clear only after long, painful talks with veterans from both clans.

Once, Stoneaxe and Oreforge had fought side by side during the last great Goblin Wars. Their banners flew together on the high passes, their dead were buried together beneath cairns of black rock. But somewhere in the blood and chaos, a seed of bitterness had been sown.

It was said, in whispered songs and half-drunk toasts, that when the battle for Deepmarrow Keep was won, Stoneaxe warriors returned to find Oreforge masons carving their names into the victory stones, boasting of their labor building siege engines and repairing broken gates.

Stoneaxe blood boiled at the insult. Fists flew. Oaths were shouted but never sealed. And though the clans did not raise blades against one another then, the wound festered in silence, generation after generation.

Now, the unearthed hall had torn the scab wide open.

They sat one evening in a dusty council chamber, the air thick with the smell of old parchment and stone oil. Rugnar rubbed his temples, staring into the guttering flame of a single lantern.

"This is poison," Thori growled. "They remember their anger better than they remember the battle."

"Ancient anger is harder than iron," Rugnar muttered.

Urmir, who had been sitting quietly near the window, spoke up in his slow, thoughtful way.

"You know," he said, "a stone doesn't choose who walks on it. It don't care who carves it. It's just stone."

They turned to look at him.

"It's the ones who shape it, and the ones who honor it, that matter," Urmir said. "Not the ones who shout loudest about whose hands touched it first."

Rugnar leaned back, considering those words carefully.

Elixa tapped her fingers on the table, her brow furrowed in thought. "What about those still living who remember the old times? Not songs, not secondhand boasts, but real memory?"

"You mean the elders," Thori said slowly.

"Aye," Elixa nodded. "The oldest dwarves, the ones whose fathers or grandfathers fought in the Goblin Wars. Someone still alive who might remember the laying of that hall."

Rugnar stood, setting his mug down with a thump. "Then we find them."

The idea was dangerous—old grudges still simmered, and dredging up the past could spark fresh fires—but it was the only honest path left.

They would seek the eldest among Ironhelm's people, those whose memories stretched back through centuries of stone, blood, and betrayal, to find a truth that no crest or carving alone could give.

Somewhere in the deep halls, among the flickering hearths and silent vaults, the real history waited—buried like gold beneath the weight of pride.

The search for the elders was not easy. Many of Ironhelm's oldest dwarves had long since gone to the stone halls beyond, their memories taken with them. Those who remained were few, wary, and weighed down by the bitter dust of long years.

At last, they found the one they sought—Thron Greybeard, a dwarf so ancient it seemed the mountain itself had kept him out of sheer stubbornness. His beard was like a waterfall of pure white, trailing down over his knees, and his eyes, clouded with blindness, stared sightless into the fire of a small hearth deep in the lower halls.

He lived alone, save for a granddaughter who tended to him with quiet reverence. When Rugnar and the others arrived, the old dwarf sat in a high-backed chair carved with runes, gnarled hands resting atop a cane as thick as a child's arm.

"You come with heavy steps," Greybeard said, his voice a low rasp, the sound of stones grinding together. "Burdened with old anger, I reckon."

Rugnar knelt by the fire, setting his hammer aside, a gesture of respect.

"Aye, Thron Greybeard," he said. "We come seeking the truth of Stoneaxe and Oreforge, about the hall found below."

The old dwarf chuckled, a sound dry as dead leaves. "Truth, eh? Hard thing to hold. Harder still to carry."

With careful, respectful questioning, they drew out the story—slowly, like coaxing water from a stubborn spring.

Thron's mind, though his body had weakened, remained sharp.

"I was a young beardling," he said, "barely old enough to lift a hammer when the hall was found. A fine place it was—rich veins in the walls, stone so sound ye could feel it hum when ye walked across it."

He sipped from a steaming cup before continuing.

"It was the Oreforge masons who carved it. Their marks were fresh when we first took steps into those halls. Fine work it was—pillars so true ye'd think the gods themselves laid 'em."

He shifted, the firelight catching the deep lines of his face.

"But when the goblins came, it was Stoneaxe blades that held the gates. Held them for months, while the tunnels ran red with blood. Without them, the hall would have fallen back to darkness."

He leaned in closer, blind eyes gleaming.

"Both have a claim. One by craft. The other by blood."

Silence settled heavy around the hearth.

Elixa sat back slowly. "No one lied. No one stole."

"Only pride," Greybeard said, smiling thinly. "The oldest poison of all."

Rugnar turned the words over carefully in his mind, weighing them like stones for a bridge.

Then he spoke, voice low but firm.

"Then the hall must be shared," he said. "Neither master, neither servant. Builders and defenders alike. Let it stand as both clans' honor — together."

Thron Greybeard chuckled again, shaking his head. "You'll find stones are easier to shape than dwarven pride, lad."

"Maybe," Rugnar said, standing. "But if the mountain stands, then so will we."

They left Greybeard's hearth with heavy thoughts and heavier purpose. The truth was not a sword to cleave the problem in two. It was a hammer, and with it, they would try to forge something stronger than hate.

The halls of Ironhelm waited, the echoes of old grudges thick as dust in the air, but Rugnar's heart was steady.

They had the truth.

Now came the harder part: convincing others to hear it.

The council chamber of Ironhelm was filled with a thick, almost physical tension. Torches flickered against the high stone walls, casting long, twitching shadows over the grim faces of dwarves who had fought beside one another in ancient battles but now glared across the room like wolves over old bones.

Durgrin Stoneaxe stood with arms crossed over his massive chest, his iron rings clinking softly with every restless shift. Across from him, Marra Oreforge, proud and sharp-eyed, stood with her arms behind her back, chin lifted in defiance. Their clans sat behind them in wary, silent rows, the air heavy with old grudges.

Rugnar stepped forward to the center of the chamber, the Ironhold Crest gleaming at his back, a reminder of their newly-won respect. He cleared his throat, his voice carrying across the stone.

"We've spoken with the living memory of Ironhelm," he began, his tone firm. "Thron Greybeard, who lived when the hall was first carved and defended, has told us true: the Oreforge masons built it. The Stoneaxe warriors bled for it. Both claims are righteous."

A ripple moved through the gathered dwarves — some murmured approval, others scowled.

Durgrin's face darkened, his fists clenching. "Builders lay the stones, aye, but it's warriors that hold them fast," he said, voice thick with anger. "Without Stoneaxe blood on those floors, the goblins would've feasted there! Our right is greater!"

Before Rugnar could answer, Marra stepped forward, her voice sharp as a honed chisel.

"And without Oreforge hands to shape the stone," she snapped, "you'd have bled in the mud and called it victory! A hall that falls at the first strike is no hall at all."

The council chamber erupted in low-voiced arguments and the clatter of shifting armor.

Thori, seeing the way tempers rose, stepped into the breach with practiced ease. She held up both hands, her voice cutting across the noise.

"Enough!" she barked. "This isn't a forge to hammer your anger on. It’s a place for craft — for building somethin’ stronger than a pile of bones."

The room quieted, grumbling but listening.

Elixa moved next, her calm voice a balm to the heat in the chamber. "Both your clans have honor in this," she said. "But pride will ruin it all. Better to bind the hall with both names, carved in stone together."

She pointed toward the great blank walls of the ancient hall, already drawn on the maps they had seen.

"Let the builders' marks be carved into one wall. Let the warriors' shields hang on the other. Stone and steel, side by side. Honor given to those who built and those who bled."

Silence fell, heavy and hard.

Durgrin’s jaw worked as if he bit down on his rage. Marra’s eyes narrowed, calculating. Neither spoke, the old wounds of pride warring against the hard truth laid before them.

Rugnar waited, heart thudding like a war drum in his chest.

At last, Durgrin growled low, "Better to share stone than shatter it."

Marra, after a long pause, inclined her head stiffly. "Let the record bear it. Stoneaxe and Oreforge. Together."

A sigh of relief, barely audible, rippled through the council chamber.

It was not peace born of love — but it was peace.

And in Ironhelm, that was a victory worth more than gold.

The great hall of Ironhelm, once heavy with suspicion and pride, now hummed with a different tension — one of uneasy hope.

Durgrin Stoneaxe and Marra Oreforge stood before the council, facing one another across a wide stone table where scribes had laid out a long parchment. Their eyes still burned with old grudges, but under it there was something harder, older: the stubborn will of dwarves who knew survival demanded sacrifice.

Durgrin was the first to break the silence.

"A trial, then," he said gruffly, as though the words pained him. "One season. The hall shared. Both clans to hold it together."

Marra’s jaw tightened, but she nodded. "And each year, we hold ceremonies to honor both the masons who built and the warriors who defended."

A murmur ran through the gathered dwarves — low and grumbling, but it lacked the sharp edge of anger that had filled the chamber before.

Guildmaster Bargrin Ironpick stepped forward, his heavy chain of office glinting in the torchlight. He lifted a hand, and silence fell.

"The stonemason guild offers more than words," Bargrin said. "We will carve a new pillar at the heart of the hall. The hammer and the axe — crossed together. A sign that neither alone shapes a mountain’s heart."

The proposal was met with a slow rumble of approval, like distant thunder rolling through a deep canyon.

Rugnar and Urmir oversaw the drafting of the formal parchment, working alongside grey-bearded scribes who dipped heavy quills into thick black ink. Every word was weighed, every oath recorded in the old tongue.

Durgrin signed first, his heavy hand pressing the quill so hard against the parchment it tore slightly. Marra signed next, her signature sharp and precise.

Both stood back, glaring at each other still — but their names sat side by side in ink and blood, bound to the same stone.

As Rugnar set the final seal upon the parchment, a roar went up from the council. It was not the wild roar of battle or the gleeful shouting of a market day — it was something deeper. A rumbling, proud chorus of low voices rising together in respect.

Bargrin approached Rugnar and his companions, holding a small stone chest. He opened it carefully, revealing four simple but masterfully made rings — thick silver bands inlaid with veins of iron and tiny, ancient runes of peace and unity.

"Not every treasure is won by blade," Bargrin said, placing the rings into their hands. "Some treasures are shaped by patience, honor... and the strength to hold one’s tongue."

Rugnar turned the heavy ring over in his hand, feeling the cold weight of it. It was no mere ornament — it was a sign of trust, of respect from a people who prized loyalty above all.

Urmir, slipping his ring onto his scarred finger, grinned. "Better this than another scar."

Elixa, with her usual quiet pride, simply nodded and slid the band onto her thumb.

Thori gave a rare smile, clapping Rugnar on the back. "We didn’t tear down the mountain today. That’s a start."

Together, they stood at the center of Ironhelm, where old grudges had nearly undone centuries of stonework, and where, because of their hands and words, something stronger than steel had been forged.

The evening air was crisp, carrying the smell of granite dust and the faint tang of forge smoke as Rugnar and his companions found a quiet spot outside the council chambers. A low stone bench sat overlooking Ironhold’s massive gates, their ancient carvings catching the soft orange glow of the torches that lined the outer walls.

Each of them held a heavy stone mug filled with thick dwarven ale, the kind that clung to the throat and warmed the bones like a slow-burning fire. They sat in comfortable silence, watching the slow movement of the city below — dwarves hauling goods, smiths hammering late into the night, children chasing each other between the carved arches.

For a long time, no one spoke. The weight of what they had accomplished was still settling into their minds like fine dust.

Finally, Urmir broke the silence, lifting his mug slightly toward the gates.

"Funny," he said, his voice quiet and rough. "After all the wars we fought... all the blood spilled across frozen fields and broken halls... all it took here was words to settle this fight."

He chuckled low in his chest, shaking his head as though the thought itself were a strange joke.

Rugnar grunted, taking a long pull of his ale before wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"Words carve deeper in stone than axes sometimes," he muttered.

Thori laughed — a real, belly-deep sound — and elbowed Rugnar lightly. "Aye, old bear. Just don't start writing poetry. I'd rather take a club to the head."

Elixa leaned back against the bench, her spear propped casually against the stone wall behind them, a rare easy smile on her lips.

"Imagine it," she said with a smirk. "Rugnar the Silver-Tongue. The bard of Hollowbarn."

Even Rugnar couldn't help but chuckle at the thought, shaking his head.

Above them, the stars stretched wide across the mountain sky, cold and bright and endless. The peaks of the Stonejaw range loomed in the distance, but tonight, they seemed less like impassable walls and more like silent, steadfast guardians.

For a moment, the world felt lighter, the burdens of blood and pride laid down like old shields at a warrior’s feet.

They sat there a while longer, speaking little, sipping their ale, letting the peace they had won settle into the marrow of the stones beneath them.

And though tomorrow might bring fresh battles, fresh troubles, tonight they had carved a small, bright corner out of the dark — with patience, with honor, and with words strong enough to bind even the proudest hearts.

A Howl at Night

The journey back to Hollowbarn was quiet, the wagon creaking under the weight of supplies and tired bodies. No songs were sung, no boasts traded. The long days and heavy talks in Ironhelm had drained them deeper than any battlefield ever had.

When they finally reached the familiar sight of Hollowbarn's wooden fences and stone cottages, a quiet relief settled over them like an old, worn cloak.

Each went their separate way.

Urmir limped to his small stone cottage, a bottle of Rugnars strong ale under one arm, and disappeared inside without a word. Rugnar watched him go for a moment, then shook his head and trudged to his own house. Thori gave a short wave and went to her quarters near the fields. Elixa and Ebrias, laughing softly about something Rugnar couldn't hear, headed toward the barn where the animals snorted and shuffled in the cooling evening air.

That night, Hollowbarn lay under a thin mist, the fields silvered by moonlight.

Rugnar woke with a start sometime past midnight. A low, shuddering howl echoed across the village — thin, lonely, and hungry. He sat up, blinking the sleep from his eyes.

"Just a damn wolf," he muttered to himself, throwing a heavy cloak around his shoulders.

Still, caution stirred in his gut. He lit a stub of candle and shuffled to the door, peering out into the darkness. The fields stretched empty under the stars. No movement among the sheep, no flicker of glowing eyes at the forest's edge. The barn was quiet, the animals calm.

Satisfied — if uneasy — Rugnar grunted and went back to bed.

The dawn broke pale and cold.

Rugnar rose stiffly and went straight to Urmir's cottage, as was his habit to check on the man who had grown to be a brother.

He knew something was wrong the moment he reached the door. It swung open lazily, the bottom scraping against the dirt. A dark smell hung in the air, thick and metallic.

"Urmir?" Rugnar called, stepping inside.

The sight froze him in his tracks.

Urmir lay sprawled on the floor, his throat torn open savagely, blood soaked deep into the floorboards. Bloody wolf tracks — too large for any normal beast — crossed the floor, leading to and from the corpse.

For a long moment, Rugnar stood there, the weight of it pressing on his chest. Then he bared his teeth and cursed loud enough to rattle the rafters.

Within an hour, the entire village was awake, the council bell ringing hard and sharp.

The villagers gathered at the green, wrapped in cloaks, faces pale and fearful. Murmurs rose like smoke on the cold morning air.

"A direwolf, must be!" shouted old Farmer Dell, his hands trembling.

"Or worse!" Mara said grimly, her arms folded tightly. "Could be a werewolf. The full moon’s past due!"

"No regular wolf tears a man like that," growled Gerf, tightening his blacksmith’s apron with trembling hands.

The party stood apart slightly, Thori chewing the inside of her cheek, Elixa frowning at the bloodstained cottage still visible down the lane.

Rugnar crossed his arms over his broad chest and spoke low to his companions.

"This ain't no regular wolf," he said. "Tracks too big. Claws too deep. And Urmir... he fought in wars. He wouldn’t just lay down for any beast."

"We have to act," Thori said, eyes flashing. "Before the village tears itself apart from fear."

Elixa nodded grimly. "If it’s a werewolf, it could still be among us."

Ebrias, standing close and pale, whispered, "We could all be in danger tonight."

Rugnar ground his teeth together, feeling the old fire rise in his belly.

"Then we find it," he said. "Whatever cursed thing did this, it won’t see another sunrise."

He turned to the gathered villagers, lifting his voice so it carried over the churning fear.

"We’ll hunt the beast," he said. "We’ll hunt it together."

The villagers clutched their cloaks tighter, exchanging glances thick with fear and doubt. But somewhere under the fear, a flicker of hope lit their eyes.

The hunt would begin.

And blood would answer blood.

They set out before midday, the mist not yet burned from the hollows, the air still heavy with the scent of blood and unease. Rugnar led the way, his face a slab of stone, the others close behind — Thori with her hammer slung over her back, Elixa tight-gripped on her spear, and Ebrias, quieter than usual, her eyes wide and darting. The High Forest loomed ahead, black with shadow beneath a flickering canopy of gold and rot as autumn deepened.

The first tracks were easy to find. Massive pawprints in the moist dirt just beyond Urmir's cottage, pressed deep as if made by something heavier than any wolf had a right to be. They followed the trail into the treeline, the moss crushed and streaked with mud. There, in the brush, a clump of fur — dark, bristled, and coarse — clung to a jagged thorn branch. Thori tugged it free and sniffed it.

"Not wolf," she said, grim. "Something... wrong with it. Musky. Old."

A little further on, they found a fox. Or what was left of one. Its body was torn nearly in half, bones split like sticks, blood soaked into the leaves around it. It had been freshly killed — the steam still barely rising from its open gut. A few paces beyond, a wolf lay sprawled at the base of a tree, throat savaged, eyes wide in frozen shock. The hunters exchanged glances.

"Whatever it is," Elixa muttered, "it kills its own kind too."

The trail grew stranger as they pressed deeper. The paw prints staggered and weaved, as though the creature walked on two legs one moment and four the next. At the base of a hollow tree, they found more fur—torn in a thick patch, caught against the bark where something massive had scraped past. Rugnar knelt and brushed his fingers over the gouge marks in the trunk.

"Claws," he said. "As long as fingers."

Mud was churned across a dry creek bed further in, with drag marks and deep ruts as if the beast had rolled or thrashed there. Bits of splintered bone littered the edge of the bank, but none matched the animals they had seen so far.

They moved on, deeper, the forest darkening with every step.

Hours passed. Tracks would appear, bold and fresh — then vanish as though the beast had lifted into the air. At one point, they followed a perfect string of paw marks for nearly a mile — only for them to end, abruptly, at a smooth patch of moss with no other sign of passage. No blood. No fur. No footprints in any direction.

They doubled back, searched for broken branches, birdcalls silenced — anything. But the trail led them in loops. Once, they passed a broken stump and realized they had circled the same glade twice.

Rugnar clenched his fists, scanning the dim woods. "It's playing with us."

Thori kicked a fallen log in frustration. "Or it's not a beast at all."

Elixa crouched by a tree, frowning hard. "It moves like something born of shadow. Too clever for an animal. Too chaotic for a man."

As the last light began to fade, they stood together in a glen ringed by trees twisted and dark, the air cold and still.

"We've tracked it all day," Ebrias whispered. "And we're no closer."

Rugnar looked down at the empty trail, his gut twisting. The prints had simply stopped again. As if the forest itself had swallowed the creature whole.

"No trail leads nowhere," he growled. "Unless the thing that left it... ain't of this world anymore."

The hunt had begun in fury. Now it ended in silence — with no beast, no den, no howls.

Just the dark woods, watching.

And something waiting.

The night weighed heavy on Hollowbarn like a millstone pressing against the sky. Rugnar, Thori and Elixa sat in Rugnar's home, cloaks drawn tight around their shoulders, mugs of cold ale untouched on the rough wooden table. The fire cracked low in the hearth, the shadows huddling in the corners of the room.

No one spoke much. Every creak of the timbers or gust of wind at the door made them glance up sharply.

Rugnar stood often, walking to the window, pushing aside the curtain to scan the village lanes. Only darkness and the faint shapes of fences and distant rooftops greeted him each time.

"We should set a watch," Rugnar said, voice low and rough. "Two awake at all times."

Thori nodded, her axe across her knees. "Best we can do 'til we know more."

Elixa sat sharpening her spear slowly, her hands steady but her face drawn. "If it strikes again, it will come when we're too tired to fight back."

They agreed on the plan, trading off in pairs, sitting in the gloom as the hours dragged on. The cold seeped into their bones, and the fire burned low, casting flickering red against the rough stone walls.

Then Rugnar froze, peering out into the night.

"Movement," he hissed. "Out by the old graveyard."

Thori and Elixa snapped to their feet. Ebrias clutched her cloak tighter but said nothing, her eyes wide with fear.

The party crept from the house, moving as silent as the mist rolling across the fields. They slipped past sleeping cottages, past the old stone well, and into the open fields beyond. The graveyard loomed ahead — a scatter of ancient, weathered stones half-swallowed by weeds and dark soil.

And there, under the skeletal arms of a leafless tree, they saw it.

A massive wolf-like creature, its body gnarled and grotesque, hunched over an open grave. Its hands — no, paws — clawed at the earth with a savage, mindless fury. Several graves were already torn open, rotting corpses and snapped skeletons lying scattered like broken dolls.

The beast muttered to itself in a guttural, broken tongue, slathering and growling between words.

"Pieces... bones... they promised... pieces for me... no, not enough... dig deeper..."

Rugnar’s blood ran cold. This was no normal beast. This was an ancient curse, a werewolf twisted beyond even legend.

Without a word, the party fanned out, weapons drawn.

Rugnar gave a low grunt, and they struck.

The werewolf reacted instantly, whirling with unnatural speed. It bellowed — a sound of rage and sorrow and madness. Claws like swords lashed out. Thori took a slash across her thigh and staggered.

Elixa lunged, driving her spear into its ribs. The beast howled but seized her in one clawed hand and hurled her across the graveyard. She hit a gravestone hard and crumpled, unmoving.

"Elixa!" Thori shouted, blood streaming down her leg.

The werewolf turned on Rugnar, snapping at his shield, claws ripping furrows into the wood. It spoke again, in a broken child's voice.

"Need more bones... make it whole again... must dig... must build..."

Rugnar roared, battering it back with his shield and hammer, but the beast's strength was monstrous. It raked across his chest, tearing through his armor, blood soaking into the leather.

Thori, dragging herself upright, swung her hammer with a scream, severing one of the beast's twisted ears. It howled in pain and rage, slashing wildly.

Rugnar, chest heaving, gripped his hammer with both hands.

"For Urmir!" he bellowed.

He ducked under a claw swipe and brought the warhammer crashing up into the werewolf's jaw, shattering bone with a sickening crunch.

Thori staggered forward, using the last of her strength to drive her axe deep into the creature's ribs.

The beast shrieked, stumbled, and finally crashed down into the churned earth of the graveyard, twitching and gasping, blood pooling black around its twisted form.

Silence fell.

Rugnar dropped to one knee, gasping, blood running from his wounds. Thori fell beside him, her axe clattering to the ground.

Only the dead bore witness in that broken field, the stars wheeling cold and indifferent above them.

After long moments, Rugnar dragged himself upright, stumbling toward where Elixa lay still. He pressed fingers to her throat — faint, but steady. She was alive.

"We live," Rugnar rasped, barely believing the words.

"But at a cost," Thori muttered, staring at the ruins around them.

The village was safe — for now. But the dark things of the world had not forgotten Hollowbarn. Not yet.

And neither, Rugnar knew, had he.

The morning after the battle dawned grey and heavy with mist, the air still bearing the sharp sting of iron and wet earth. Hollowbarn was quiet, the usual morning clatter of buckets and beasts silenced by mourning. The people moved like shadows through the village, gathering at the edge of the graveyard where a long trench had been dug.

Urmir's body had been cleaned and wrapped in a cloak of thick wool, his old short sword laid across his chest. The others — the broken, rotted corpses the werewolf had torn from the earth — had been rewrapped and laid to rest beside him, to be returned to the sleep that had been so violently disturbed.

The villagers stood in a wide half-circle, heads bowed. Mara the herb-woman lit sweetwood and bitterroot on a brazier. The smoke curled into the sky like thin, grasping fingers. Children clung to their parents. Gerf the blacksmith, his beard damp with grief, stood like a carved statue, unmoving.

Rugnar stepped forward, the weight of the moment pressing on his broad shoulders like stone. He stood beside Urmir's body and looked out over the faces of Hollowbarn — his people.

He cleared his throat and began, voice low and rough.

"Urmir wasn't born in Hollowbarn. He came here near broken — a man with scars too deep for most to carry. But he stood back up."

He paused, swallowing hard.

"When I was half-starved and pinned down in the mud at Frostpass, it was Urmir who pulled me out. While arrows flew, while the line fell, he grabbed me by the collar and dragged me back behind our shield wall. Didn't say a word — just spat blood and kept fighting. That's the kind of man he was."

Rugnar knelt, pressing one hand to Urmir's wrapped chest.

"You came back from the grave once already, brother. This time... we won't let you be pulled again."

He stood slowly, then looked at Mara, who stepped forward with a small scroll of parchment. Her voice was soft, like wind through tall grass.

"Stone above, stone below,
Let none disturb your final hollow.
Sleep now beneath our mountain sky,
While fire warms the world you left behind.
May hammers never rust,
And your name be carved in deeper trust."

Thori stepped up next. She said little — just placed Urmir's sword gently at the foot of the grave, not his weapon but one he had borrowed once and returned sharpened, polished, better than he'd received it. Her eyes shimmered but she did not cry.

Elixa held her silence longest, then finally murmured, "He fought like he wanted to live, even after everything was taken from him. That's more than most."

One by one, the villagers stepped forward, tossing dirt, stones, and flowers onto the bodies. When it was done, the trench was sealed, the earth patted flat with quiet care.

Not far off, a second grave had been dug — deeper, meaner, with iron spikes sunk into the bottom. The werewolf's body had been hacked apart, burned until the hair curled and the bones cracked, and then buried in pieces, each in its own hole, salted and sealed. A ring of black ash circled the site. No marker was placed. No prayers spoken.

That night, Rugnar's cottage burned bright with torchlight and warmth. The villagers packed into his home — shoulders pressed, mugs full. Fresh bread, roast lamb, sweet ale, and pipeweed passed from hand to hand. The weight of sorrow didn't vanish, but softened.

Mara raised a cup. "To the shield that never broke."

"To Urmir," came the low chorus.

Rugnar stood by the fire, a mug in hand, staring into the flames. Then he spoke again.

"He once told me that when he died, he wanted his story sung not by minstrels, but by those who fought beside him — with scars, not songs."

He took a drink, wiping his beard.

"I've got the scars. And now, we've got his story."

A silence followed — heavy, meaningful. Then Thori, suddenly hoarse, muttered, "He'd have hated all this fuss."

That broke the gloom. Laughter erupted, tired but real. People drank deeper. Someone brought out a flute, and soon old marching songs were hummed, then sung louder, like thunder rolling back across the hills.

And in the firelight, Rugnar watched the faces of his people — no longer only farmers and smiths, but survivors. Blooded. Bound by more than just fences and work.

And somewhere in the dark between the trees, whatever watched them that night knew one thing:

Hollowbarn would not fall quietly.